

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Friday, February 25, 2022

The House met at 1.30 p.m.

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

**LEAVE OF ABSENCE**

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I have received communication from Mr. Rushton Paray MP, Member for Mayaro and Mr. Davendranath Tancoo MP, Member for Oropouche West, who have requested leave of absence from today's sitting of the House. The leave which the Members seek is granted.

PAPERS LAID

1. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation for the year ended September 30, 2019. [*The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh)*]
To be referred to the Public Accounts Committee.
2. Annual Report of the Registration, Recognition and Certification Board for the year ended December 31, 2019. [*Hon. T. Deyalsingh*]
3. Annual Report of the Registration, Recognition and Certification Board for the year ended December 31, 2020. [*Hon. T. Deyalsingh*]
4. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to the Second Report of the Public Accounts Committee on an Examination of the Report of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the Financial Year 2020. [*Hon. T. Deyalsingh*]

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you again. Madam Speaker, there are six questions for oral answers. We will be answering five today. We ask for a deferral of question 72.

On the written questions, there are 17. We will be laying 15 today and we ask for a deferral on questions 48 and 61. Thank you very much.

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva South.

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

The following question stood on the Order Paper in the name of Mr. Rushton Paray (Mayaro):

Corruption Perception Index (New Measures to Address)

72. In light of Trinidad and Tobago's score of 41/100 on the Corruption Perception Index, will the hon. Prime Minister state what specific new measures will be taken to improve the country's global standing?

Question, by leave, deferred.

Telecommunication Services of Trinidad and Tobago (TSTT) Details of Decrease in Revenue

64. Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (Couva South) asked the hon. Minister of Public Utilities:

Having regard to the \$453 million decrease in revenue experienced by the Telecommunication Services of Trinidad and Tobago (TSTT), during the last fiscal year, will the Minister advise this House:

- a. is this likely to negatively impact the company's human resources; and
- b. if the answer to part (a) is in the affirmative, have there been any discussions with the recognized majority unions on said matter?

The Minister of Public Utilities (Hon. Marvin Gonzales): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, TSTT's audited financial statement for the year ended 31 March, 2021, TSTT indicated that the company recorded a decline in revenue of \$453 million or 18 per cent, compared to the prior financial year. In this regard, TSTT has advised that the company has been significantly impacted by the adverse economic conditions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Such conditions, coupled with the continued industry-wide trend of substitution of lower margin data services in place of voice services and the legacy cost associated with redundant technology in TSTT's existing operations, have continued to have adverse effects on the company's performance and business results.

TSTT has also advised that over the past 18 months the company has been implementing various initiatives to reduce non-personnel cost, as well as modernize its operations in response to these trends.

Additionally, in order to survive and to return to profitability, the company has indicated there is a need to restructure its operations. As such, on the 17th of January 2022, the company wrote to its employee representative unions, as well as its management staff inviting them to consultation on the restructuring of the company. The first meeting took place on the 1st of February, 2022, with all relevant stakeholder groups and the consultation is ongoing.

TSTT is fully cognizant of its responsibility under the requisite collective bargaining agreements with the employee representatives and will comply with all provisions of same and assures that such consultation will conform with the tenets of good industrial relations practice, as it seeks to put the company on a pathway to sustainability and profitability.

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva South.

Mr. Indarsingh: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Minister, can you confirm if the General Manager of Shared Services with responsibility for human resources and industrial relations, on a meeting of the 1st of February, 2022, with the Communication Workers Union, indicated that 455 workers will lose their jobs in that bargaining unit?

Madam Speaker: Minister of Public Utilities.

Hon. M Gonzales: Madam Speaker, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has stated its position that it is not privy to the discussions going on between TSTT's management and the representative union, so I cannot confirm the information that is being put forward by the Member for Couva South.

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva South.

Mr. Indarsingh: So, Minister, are you telling this House that given the majority shareholding that the Government has in TSTT that, as the line Minister, you have not been privy to the discussions that are going on between the Communication Workers Union and the management of TSTT?

Madam Speaker: Minister of Public Utilities.

Hon. M. Gonzales: Madam Speaker, TSTT and the employees and the representative union, they are governed by a collective bargaining arrangement. Such collective bargaining arrangement does not provide for the Government of Trinidad and Tobago to be privy to these discussions and therefore we will comply with the terms of the collective bargaining agreement. That is as simple as that.

Madam Speaker: Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla.

**Mental and Physical Exhaustion of Health Care Workers
(Measures to Address)**

- 66. Dr. Rai Ragbir** (*Cumuto/Manzanilla*) asked the hon. Minister of Health:
Having regard to the mental and physical exhaustion being experienced by health care workers as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, will the Minister

advise as to what is being done to address said mental and physical exhaustion?

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. The Ministry of Health and the regional health authorities remain cognizant of staff fatigue throughout the pandemic and have implemented various strategies to assist staff with coping and mental health issues which include:

1. staff rotation;
2. the use of the Employee Assistance Programme;
3. the use of the mental health tele-consultation with one-on-one counselling with officers; and
4. sensitization sessions with frontline staff in psychological first aid and maintaining mental well-being.

Further, the regional health authorities have continuously created a positive work environment for its staff through incentives for workload management, twilight—work/life balances and recognition and appreciation through awards for service and excellence.

Lastly, Madam Speaker, I wish to express my sincere thanks again to our dedicated and ever-committed health workers who continue to go beyond the call of duty in offering an invaluable service to our population during this COVID-19 pandemic.

Madam Speaker: Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla.

Dr. Ragbir: Thank you again, Madam Speaker. Can the hon. Minister of Health indicate whether our unsung heroes, our Ministry of Health team, our first-line health care workers, may be considered for some form of monetary remuneration or even compensatory time off? I know this is a bit farfetched, but I want to put it on the table. Thank you.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh:—[*Technical difficulty*] frontline health care workers, the necessary vacation, and so on and compensatory time off is something that was done. They were working like 24 hours and they would get 48 hours off, and so on.

May I also say that the report under Professor Seemungal recognized the NCRHA, did not call them by name, but if I quote:

We wish to commend one institution, one RHA, where there was a staff mental health and wellness service serviced by two psychologists as an example of best practice.

And this best practice, NCRHA was the hub of the COVID response, because they catered for four facilities: Caura, Couva, Arima and UTT. So we recognize it and we will adopt that best practice that applied to those four institutions, across the board. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva South.

**Indian Trail Recreation Ground
(Contract for the Upgrade of)**

70. Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (*Couva South*) asked the hon. Minister of Rural Development and Local Government:

Has the Ministry awarded a contract for the upgrade of the Indian Trail Recreation Ground?

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. On behalf of the hon. Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, I can say that the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government has not awarded any contract for the upgrade of the Indian Trail Recreation Ground in fiscal 2022. However, it should be noted that this ground is the responsibility of the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation, which has indicated that the upgrade of the Indian Trail Recreation Ground may, in all likelihood, be submitted in its request to the Ministry for inclusion in the draft

estimates for fiscal 2023. Subject to finalization of its request to the Ministry for funding—

[Device goes off]

I apologize—in its development programmes for 2023.

Madam Speaker: Okay. So, I would just advise everyone to make sure that their devices are compliant, because we nearly had a break—

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Yes.

Madam Speaker:—in our proceedings, if the Minister on his legs would have had to leave the room. Supplemental? Member for Couva South.

Mr. Indarsingh: Thank you very much. Minister, can you inform this House—
[Technical difficulty] —notice, reference number BO 2022 of 2022 was served on a company named Pical Services of No. 140 Southern Main Road, Couva for a contravention of section 162(1)(a) of the Municipal Corporations Act for carrying out unauthorized engineering and excavation work on the Indian Trail ground? Because you said that no contract was given.

Madam Speaker: Member, Member, it is 15 seconds. I have been lost in the question. Minister.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Madam Speaker, I could only advise the hon. Member, as I have stated clearly, that the project is under the remit of the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation. I do not know why that is so hard to understand, and that the project is being considered for fiscal 2023. And I can tell you that the scope of works may include, but not be limited to, the grading of the grounds, which I think the Member should welcome; the construction of a pavilion, which I think the community will welcome; and a jogging track, which I think the community will welcome.

In addition, upgrade works to the Indian Trail Recreation Ground will be reviewed, as I said, by the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, under the national programme for the construction and rehabilitation of pavilions and recreation facilities throughout Trinidad. So this is a welcome opportunity which the Member should grab on to for his constituents, instead of trying to make a mountain out of the proverbial molehill.

Madam Speaker: Couva South.

Mr. Indarsingh: Thank you, Madam Speaker. In spite of the long run-up from the Minister of Health, acting for the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, could the Minister inform this House if no contract was awarded why was excavation works taking place on the Indian Trail Recreation Ground? It is simple as that.

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva South, having regard to the question that was asked, the answers were given, the supplemental, I rule that question out of order. Member for Couva South.

**National Commission for Self Help Limited
(Emergency Relief Grants)**

71. Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (*Couva South*) asked the hon. Minister of Sport and Community Development:

Will the Minister provide an update on applications to the National Commission for Self Help Limited for Emergency Relief Grants by ten constituents of Couva South whose properties were negatively affected by adverse weather conditions on Friday September 03, 2021?

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, on behalf of the hon. Minister of Sport and Community Development. Madam Speaker, of the 11 names submitted by the MP for Couva South to the Ministry of Sport and Community Development on September 09,

2021, only three applications were received by the National Commission for Self Help Limited, south regional office for Emergency Relief Grants as a result of the inclement weather experienced on Friday, September 03, 2021. One other name on the list applied in 2017.

The Self Help Commission however, has on its records three additional names submitted to its south regional office for Emergency Relief Grants as a result of the inclement weather of Friday, September 03, 2021. Consequently, the details of all the names are listed below: Sherifa Mohammed, submitted for approval, awaiting implementation, application submitted for emergency assistance January 2022; Selisha Boodoo, application received in 2017 and not recommended, as there is a business on the compound, no new application received; Dwight Khan, Sean Ramsaran, Frederick King, Tyrone Thurton, Tahira Mustapha, Skylar Maharaj, Duran Bissessar, Sylvester Cadogan, Madan Seerattan are not registered on the system; Dion Morean, not on a list from the MP, not recommended in September '21, as the applicant was on the land for only two years; Lalchan Mahabir, not on the list from the MP, submitted for approval in February 2022, which is this month; Satnarine Lalla, not on the list of the MP, submitted for approval in February 2022. Accordingly, of the 10 names submitted by the MP for Couva South, there is no record of an application by seven of these people.

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva South.

Mr. Indarsingh: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Minister, are you telling this House that the Minister is not aware of a letter that was sent on the 9th of September, 2021, to herself as the line Minister, to Mr. Elroy Julien, the Chief Executive Officer of the National Self Help Commission, and also to the Chairman of the National Self Help Commission, which stated the following names in relation to

constituents whose roofs were blown off: Sherifa Mohammed, Selisha Boodoo, Dwight Khan, Sean Ramsaran, Frederick King, Tahira Mustapha, Skylar Maharaj, Duran Bissessar, Sylvester Cadogan and one Mr. Seerattan?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Madam Speaker, the most I could do is repeat for the listening ear of the hon. Member. The names that you called: Dwight Khan, Sean Ramsaran, Frederick King, Tyrone Thurton, Tahira—[*Technical difficulties*] Sylvester Cadogan, Madan Seerattan are not registered on the system. So what we would like to suggest, if you could assist these people by having them registered on the system. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva South.

Mr. Indarsingh: Madam Speaker, it is passing strange that a Government that has committed itself—

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva South, you are seasoned. This is an opportunity to ask questions, not statements. You have 15 seconds to ask a question. Do you wish to ask a question?

Mr. Indarsingh: Yes, yes.

Madam Speaker: Please proceed, 15 seconds.

Mr. Indarsingh: Madam Speaker, could the Minister, on behalf of his ministerial colleague, confirm when these 11 persons would receive their grants? Because, based on the disaster, I, as the Member of Parliament, submitted a list to the National Self Help Commission seeking assistance on their behalf. That is all.

Madam Speaker: And, Member for Couva South, supplemental question out of order based on the answers that have been given to your original question and your supplemental question; asked and answered.

Member for Mayaro, and this is question 73.

Outbreak of COVID-19 Infections (Plans to Manage)

73. Mr. David Lee (*Pointe-a-Pierre*) on behalf of Mr. Rushton Paray (*Mayaro*) asked the hon. Minister of Education:

Given the daily rate of COVID-19 infections and the planned physical reopening of schools for standard five students, will the Minister provide the Ministry's plans to manage this process to avoid an outbreak?

The Minister of Education (Hon. Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Education fully understands the gravity of the COVID-19 pandemic that has affected the lives of so many people, both here at home and abroad. The Ministry of Education is first and foremost guided by the directives, that is, the Legal Notices of the Ministry of Health. To this end, the Ministry of Education implemented the following:

1. The introduction of health and safety guidelines that were developed in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and our key stakeholders. These guidelines outline safety measures with respect to signage, hand washing, temperature scanning, physical distancing protocols, mask wearing, hygiene protocols, cleaning and disinfecting schedules, isolation rooms, treatment of suspected cases.
2. The installation of hand sinks in every school.
3. Printing and delivery of COVID-19 signage and posters for schools.
4. Development of hand-washing videos.
5. The preparation of isolation rooms.
6. The provision of health and safety consumables and minor equipment for use by staff and students, such as masks, hand sanitizers, hand soap and temperature scanners.

Madam Speaker, schools are routinely reminded of the need to continue to put these protocols into practice.

In addition, Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Education, through the Education Health Service Unit, continues to provide:

- on-site and real-time emergency case management in situations of suspected and/or confirmed cases of the virus, which would include contact tracing, provision of letters of isolation, facilitation of COVID-19 testing, and conducting of COVID-19 management drills at schools;
- screening and referral to a local health centre or relevant County Medical Officer of Health Office for all students and staff categorized as any person reported to have flu-like symptoms or has a history of being a primary contact, or has taken a COVID-19 test regardless of reason or, who is with a confirmed positive COVID-19 status and has now been released;
- the referral of students and staff to local health care institutions and the relevant CMOH offices for attention; and
- up-to-date reports on cases in schools and the associated communities.

Madam Speaker, this can effectively mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 virus in schools which, when paired with the vigilance of parents and guardians and the encouragement of students to maintain their personal safety measures, will be effective in reducing the transmission of COVID-19 among students of Standard 5 and the wider student population.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, questions 48, 61 and 72 are deferred for 14 days. Member for Tabaquite.

**LEVELS OF DISPARITY IN EDUCATION
(PROVISION OF EQUITABLE ACCESS TO)**

Ms. Anita Haynes (*Tabaquite*): Madam Speaker, I beg to move the following Motion standing in my name:

Whereas it is the responsibility of the Government to provide equal and equitable opportunities for all citizens to access quality education;

And whereas the Government has failed to address the existing inequities in accessing education exacerbated by the shift to virtual learning;

And whereas the Government has failed to provide safe learning spaces following its sudden decision to institute in-person classes for some students;

And whereas the Government has failed to meet the varied requirements of teachers leaving many ill-equipped to execute quality online instruction;

And whereas the Government has failed to effectively manage resources to facilitate adequate funding to the GATE programme, government sponsored scholarships and bursaries, school feeding programme, special education access and other school related services;

Be it resolved that this House takes note of the increasing and unacceptable levels of disparity in inequitable access to education and the failure of the Ministry of Education to deliver on its essential mandate;

And be it further resolved that this House calls on the Government to take all immediate and necessary steps to provide equitable access to all students.

Madam Speaker, as I begin my contribution here today, I would firstly like to take the opportunity to thank the Members of my caucus, led by the hon. Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, for recognizing the importance of this Motion and what it means for our nation at this critical time.

Madam Speaker, I will establish that there is indeed an essential mandate for the Ministry of Education to provide the equitable access to education. And by using three examples in my presentation, the digital divide, access to special education, and the treatment of neuro-divergent students and young children

through education, I will use those to demonstrate in my Motion that the Ministry has failed in its essential mandate.

My colleagues would go on and highlight further issues, discussing the key issues in the Motion raised throughout this debate. I think we have to be very clear about one thing, Madam Speaker, as I proceed here today and as we proceed with the Motion before us today. This is a critical Motion for all the people of Trinidad and Tobago. We are talking about the future of our nation. We are talking about our present capacity and what it means for the nation that we hope to create. We are discussing something that no one in this room will escape. We are talking about the foundation of our society.

And, Madam Speaker, while we exist in an adversarial—I believe today should be an easy day for you, given that there are a number of key points that we can all agree upon. One, that there is a requirement of the Ministry, based on their own documentation. There is requirement of the Ministry to provide equitable access. This is beyond equal access to education. We are talking about ensuring. When we talk about equity we are talking about ensuring that persons have what they need to succeed. And in order to do so, in order to ensure that persons have what they need to succeed, a critical component in assessing our policies, whether they are succeeding or failing, would be data.

And, Madam Speaker, everyone who prepared for this Motion here today, I think, can be clear on one thing, we are facing a data deficit like no other. As policymakers, as persons who are engaged in the business of ensuring the people of Trinidad and Tobago have what they need to succeed, and in particular our students, we are creating policies with the absence of data. Now, if the data exists and it is simply not shared with the public, that would be presented in the Minister's answer to my contribution here today. But if it does not exist, it proves

that we have a real situation, where we are taking shots in the dark and not making intentional steps towards creating a better future for our country.

Madam Speaker, in my preparation for this debate here today, I had the good fortune of utilizing two reports that were laid in this Parliament by two different joint select committees. The first one is the Joint Select Committee on Public Administration and Social Services, when they looked at the impact of COVID-19 and the hybrid learning system and what that meant for students being able to access online learning.

2.00 p.m.

And the second one, it is the Joint Select Committee on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity. And that Committee looked at the right to equal access to education with specific focus on the underperformance of schools in Port of Spain and environs with respect to the performance in terminal examinations. And those two committees meetings, based on the evidence that persons presented, based on the information that was given throughout the committee hearings, provided the data that I needed to come to the conclusion, Madam Speaker, that this House really needs to take note of the increasing and unacceptable levels of the disparity in access to equitable education.

Madam Speaker, I begin with the digital divide. When the pandemic started in about March of 2020, April of 2020, the nation was presented with information by a former Minister of Education that we had some 65,000 students without devices. As alarming as that was, the following year, in January of 2021 this Committee, the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration, via their hearings we learned that some 46,770 students, both at primary and secondary school level, had never logged on. And I want to underscore that, eh, never logged on to online portals facilitating online learning.

That is some 46,000-plus students who had not been to school for over a year at that point in time. Never logged on. That number did not take into consideration students who may have logged on once, twice, and then not completed the rest of the term. It does not take into consideration students who may have logged on for logging on sake, and then went about doing whatever daily activities, household activities, et cetera. That number just tells us that we as a society had some 46,000-plus students never attending school over a year.

And when we—when I say that the COVID-19 situation exacerbated a problem that we faced before, that when we approached 2020 with an administration in power who was talking about *Vision 2020*, and then *Vision 2030* pushing it back. An administration who in 2017, presented a policy document, the draft policy document on education policy that discussed the importance of a national curriculum that empowers our students for the world this we are going into. You were already talking about a ministry and an administration that, by their writings, what they have presented to us by way of policy, understood the importance of bridging that digital divide, of bridging that gap. But then, we came to 2020 and 2021 and we realized that words that have no action behind it really amounts to nothing. Because they said it in 2017, 2018, 2019, no action, no action, no action. 2019, pandemic. We come into 2020 and all of a sudden no devices.

And, Madam Speaker, without COVID-19, without COVID-19 in the discussion of equitable access, can we all sit here and say that students who have access to the Internet, to computers, to do their work, in the absence of a pandemic I am talking about, do not have some advantage over students who are unable to access the Internet? Most of us here would be lost. We will be lost to research anything without access to our devices.

You know, Madam Speaker, we have also gotten to the point during the

COVID-19 pandemic discussing devices as though all would be equal. But using a device to get online for the purposes of learning is fundamentally different from having a device for having a device's sake. So if you are using your devices for entertainment, a smart phone may suffice. But if you are using your device for the purposes of learning, then we ought to be looking at what difference does having a laptop make, a desktop make, what difference does the type of Internet, the broadband that you have, the bandwidth that you have. What does it mean for students? This is what I mean when I say, Madam Speaker, that our data deficit, the fact that we are not in a space as a society, that as far as I am aware, the Ministry is not in a space right now to tell us in drill down data points what our students are facing.

I have met a number of students who have had to repeat certain Standards, repeat certain Forms, because they were unable to maximize the hybrid learning system. Now, the Minister may tell us today that as we move forward into the reopening of schools and getting our students back out into in-person learning, that we have solved some problem. But I beg to differ, because regardless of where we are now with in-person learning, the fact is the students that we are training now are coming in two years later, already disadvantaged, but they are also expected to go into a world where this technology is required.

And so, if there is not a sustained programme, if there is not a recognition by the Government, a recognition by policy makers, that access to the Internet, access to devices, access to the type of digital education required to be a successful thriving citizen is not a requirement because of COVID-19, but is a requirement because of the world we live in now. If we do not get that recognition from this Government, Madam Speaker, then we would not have found a solution to our problem.

Quite frankly, Madam Speaker, it was always disappointing for us on this side that in 2015 the Government failed to recognize the importance of the laptop programme and ICT in schools. It has always been a major source of contention for us that the Government failed to consider what worked well with the programme, and then optimize the programme so that it can fit the needs of their education policy. And it has always been a disappointment for us that in 2020, 2021, 2022, that our students, 50,000 thereabout that we know of, and many more that go uncounted because of our data deficit, that they are left in the dark, left out of what is supposed to be both an equal and equitable education system.

And so, Madam Speaker, just on the digital divide alone, I think we can be very clear and we can all agree that the Ministry has failed in that regard to meet its mandate. And it is not good enough to tell us about devices that went out after the fact. It is not good enough to tell us about the numbers that went out after we identified the problem without telling us what is put in place for those students who were so disadvantaged, because that is what we are talking about today. We are talking about equity. So if you recognize there was a problem, if you recognize there were key failures, then you have to tell us what brings these students up to speed? What allows them to succeed now going forward?

Madam Speaker, I turn now to a part of my Motion that really saddens me, and that is the state of special education in our society. Both of the joint select committees that I referenced, Madam Speaker, though while they were treating with different things, came to similar conclusions on the state of special education in our society. Madam Speaker, I have here with me some statements from—a statement from the Standing Finance Committee for fiscal 2018, so this predates the current Minister. And before I go forward I want to just—if I did not make it clear before—I am discussing Government policy. And so, it is not any one

Minister or any one person who is put in charge but it is Government policy overall, and what that means for our students.

And so, I am looking at a statement from the Standing Finance Committee for fiscal 2018, and the former Minister spoke about then:

The Ministry of Education is committed to providing quality inclusive education for all students from early childhood level to tertiary level. A major initiative being rolled out this year is a project entitled, ‘creating a culture of student achievements’.

He goes on to say that—they were looking at Standard 5:

Remedial initiative which would identify students who are at risk of underperforming, and that they would also look and treat with the causative factors such as learning disorders and psychological factors.

Madam Speaker, they spoke about the roll out of a student monitoring system to support and promote teaching and learning at a primary level. They also spoke then about targeted interventions for students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, also known as ADHD, and that a Note would have been submitted to Cabinet for its consideration. And all of this would have been in keeping with equity and inclusiveness. So that is why I said in the beginning there are a number of things that we could all agree upon.

However, after this was said, fiscal 2018, when I sat in the other place a Motion was brought by an Independent Senator that looked at the state of special education in our society. The same Minister was tasked with responding then. And I spoke in that debate but there were a number of key things that stood out to me. At that time, even though this particular “creating a culture of student achievement” was announced the year before, it was not brought into that debate which then told me that it was something that was announced and quickly collapsed,

never initiated, never implemented but another promise given to parents and students who are most in need of us reaching out as policymakers to create inclusive policies, and bring everyone into the system in an equitable fashion. So, Madam Speaker, that is 2018.

Madam Speaker, 2019, in other place, an entire debate. Minister at that time was very defensive and spoke about what was being done and implemented currently, without speaking about the impact, without speaking about key stakeholder consultation, without stating the evidence to say what was currently being implemented, or what was being implemented then to state that it was working. And so, now, we have joint select committees meeting in 2021 and the evidence telling us, that despite numerous promises, despite the policy being written down on paper, nothing was in fact being done to bring these students as inclusive members of our education system.

And I say that, Madam Speaker, because the numbers stand with me. In—during the hearing portion of that joint select committee meeting you had representatives from the Support Autism T&T speaking about their 150 members, that is, 150 children who are members of Support Autism T&T. And we learned then that of that 150 students, 90 of those children are not enrolled in any school at all. That is 60 per cent of the students enrolled. And so that is from the number that we know. The alarming fact is that there is a possibility that there is a much larger number that we simply do not know.

So you have 30 per cent enrolled in the government and government-assisted spaces, and 20 per cent in private schools. You had similar numbers coming in from some of the other contributors in that hearing. And what does this tell us? It tells us that—well they told us that the children turned away because the schools were simply not equipped to cater to the needs of these students. And so they were

left out. And so we cannot even get to equitable treatment, because we do not even have equal treatment at this point because they are left out of the system.

Now, I raise this, Madam Speaker, in the hopes that during this debate that when we recognize that promises have been made over time to these vulnerable groups, that you are talking about parents and children who are looking on in the hopes that some of the many recommendations that would have been made over several years, that somebody will take the accountability and say, “Listen, we are setting timelines and deliverables to implement these things that we have been talking about for years and years.”

We cannot continue, Madam Speaker, going to society and saying, “We are going to revise the policy document. We are going to reevaluate what was said and what was done over the last years.” The time for action is now, Madam Speaker. The time for action is now. We are stating that right now we have had a number of students who have been disadvantaged for years. They have faced untold trauma in the hybrid learning system. They have very unique experiences with the online learning if they were able to access it. Because you are talking about students who are tactile learners, who are not visual learners having to come back—to be part of an online learning system. And what that means for them reentering school when they can, and what that regression in the time period that they would not have been able to access the type of learning that they need, what that means for them. And then, what targeted interventions are going to be put in place? Because if we do not begin talking about targeted interventions, quite frankly, we would not be getting the equity we are looking for.

Madam Speaker, the Committee on Human Rights, Equity and Diversity noted that the expand—that there needed to be an expanded core curriculum—that we needed to expand the curriculum to treat with students with disabilities. Special

education needs are not currently housed under the MOE core curriculum. And, consequently, we have improper and ineffective implementation of the expanded core curriculum as students with disabilities require special education, and the system currently is inadequately tooled and with the requisite skills to perform to their true potential.

So, Madam Speaker, in the hearing in our very own Parliament, we were told that right now, right now, what the Ministry has in place has failed students with special needs. Madam Speaker, there are a number of things that we may consider commonsense approaches. However, there are a number of things that a lot of people would say, listen, well we know this, we know that. However, I think it is very important, very important, for us as a Parliament with those of us who are tasked; everybody in this House is tasked with the responsibility of representation that we take it upon ourselves to acknowledge where we are as society right now. And again, the purpose of this Motion is to lay out the critiques that we are facing and have robust discussion in the aims of finding solutions. So not just another talk shop, but in the aims of finding solutions for the many problems that our students are facing.

And, Madam Speaker, I want to turn very quickly to GATE. You see, we understand that in strained circumstances there is a need to reengineer certain programmes. But it needs to be done so keeping the Ministry's key mandate at the forefront. And if you are thinking about things like that you would not simply reduce the allocation, but you would look at the allocation and you would look at the investment, and you would ensure that there are significant returns to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And so when we talk about GATE, we only hear, "Listen, the programme had to be reengineered." We know that there is a means test. And I want to—the reason I am raising the means test here is I want to bring

to the attention of the Minister what that means, that new bureaucratic and financial barrier to the access of tertiary education means for real citizens of this country.

I have had calls from significant number of students who made their grades, applied, did the means test, were told that they qualified. Because the GATE system—the money was not paid out to the university within the appropriate amount of time those students were barred from registering for their classes, or in some cases taking their examinations. So the parents of some of the students who could borrowed however, scraped up the money, paid the tuition, again, under the understanding that they are entitled to GATE based on the means test that they participated in, et cetera. When they went back the following semester, they were told that they no longer qualified.

Madam Speaker, this is a severe injustice to persons who are simply trying to better their circumstance via tertiary education. And that further exacerbates an inequitable access to tertiary education. It means those who have will continue to have, but those who do not will find it increasingly more difficult to make it, and to have that social mobility that economic mobility that they are seeking.

And so, Madam Speaker, as I conclude, it is my sincerest hope that this debate today is treated with the seriousness that is required, that it is approached from a solution-oriented space, that the concerns are not only noted but acted upon, and that we recognize as a Parliament that the Ministry's failure to meet its mandate impacts all of society for generations to come. And I thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: This Motion requires a seconder.

Mr. Lee: Madam Speaker, sorry. I would like to second the Motion by the

Member of Tabaquite and I defer to speak at a later time in the proceedings.

Question proposed.

Madam Speaker: Minister of Education.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Education (Hon. Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to this Motion in this honourable House, and I join with the Member for Tabaquite in speaking to the importance of such a Motion for the country. This Motion is dated, Madam Speaker, it was filed I think over a year ago, and it has now made its way to be debated at the Parliament. And I want to state from the onset that this Government has been resolute, and aggressive, and proactive, in providing equitable access to education for all of our students, especially in the situation that evolved from the onset of the pandemic.

I believe this Motion came from a good place. I believe that the Member would have been recognizing the global reality that not all our students were prepared for the sudden shift to virtual learning. And I say the global reality, Madam Speaker, because that is what it is. There is no country in the world that was prepared to move all of their students from a physical setting of education to online. And that is the reality. Big country, small country, developed country, developing country; all education sectors were caught on the back foot scrambling to deal with the reality of having to move our students online.

And the main issue surrounding that lack of preparation would have been the lack of devices in some cases and the lack of connectivity. Regardless of what the status of the country was, Madam Speaker, that was the reality that we were faced within the education sector. And even before this Motion was filed, since the closure of schools in March of 2020, the Government moved swiftly to put

measures in place to deal with the situation that arose. And that situation is that education moved online, and there were some children who were not equipped to do so.

Now, I have spoken to these measures multiple times in the House and in the public domain, but it is important to reiterate exactly what has been done since then. In recognition of the fact that our students would have been at home engaging in at-home learning, education material was offered to our students via YouTube, television, on about four of our cable stations, radio, print media, our ECCE, one of our most vulnerable sectors as well. And they still, all of this is still ongoing because we understand that we still have students at home. We still have parents who need that support in giving educational material to their students during this time.

The Member spoke to the students who did not log on, and that is the reality of it. And that is what we had to deal with and make policy to be able to mitigate the effects of. And so, there were printed packages prepared through very hard work by our teachers to assist those students who for some reason could not be online. And those packages many parents were very vigilant in collecting packages, dropping back packages. And that was the interim measure practised around the world, not just in Trinidad and Tobago, practised around the world.

In some countries, we had teachers even going into communities with black boards. Right in Guyana, writing on black boards in communities. And these were the kinds of things that countries had to put in place, and Trinidad and Tobago was no different to ensure that we reached both the students who could be online and the student who could not, because every country was grappling with that situation.

Our teachers also—we had to pay attention to our teachers, because in some cases we had teachers already using blended system in their classrooms. A good

example would be our tertiary students. In those cases the teachers were already using E-classrooms, they were already very involved in online learning, blended learning. So it was more seamless for them to move online. And even with the secondary and primary system we would have had some teachers using those methods, but it was not the general thing.

And therefore, the Ministry had to offer to our teachers training to be able to deliver online in these areas, and that was done. And I can tell you, Madam Speaker, the courses were in most cases oversubscribed. They continue to be very well participated in by our teachers, because across the board, generally, our teachers were very happy to take the learning that was being offered to be able to reach the students who they could no longer interact with physically.

So in term of dealing with our students who were not online, there were measures put in place to deal with that. In terms of dealing with our students who could have been online but they did not have devices and connectivity, what did we do? Immediately, Madam Speaker, on recognizing the issue that we had to move back to virtual school come September 2020, based on our numbers, the appeal was made to corporate Trinidad and Tobago to assist us. Because knowing that Government procurement would not be immediate, and trying to deal with our immediate circumstances the appeal was made and corporate Trinidad and Tobago, as we know, responded above and beyond the call of duty donating over 22,000 devices directly to schools and to students who needed them. And I want to thank again, corporate Trinidad and Tobago—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:—and they continue to be involved in our schools, as some of them have been before.

The Government through the Ministry of Education developed and issued

the means test for devices, that was in March/April of 2021. We procured 20,000 devices and our students received those 20,000 devices, fit for purpose devices. The Member spoke to the purpose of devices. Where we received tablets, Madam Speaker, we focused on our primary school students with the tablets. Where we have laptops, we focus on our secondary school students understanding the difference in needs of our students at this time.

2.30 p.m.

We procured and distributed 10,000 MiFi devices and we negotiated with the Internet service providers to give three months' free service to assist our families even more, where they needed that. And so our teachers benefited from devices, our students benefited from devices. And as we moved into academic year 2021/2022, we again sent out that means test in October of 2021, to ensure that were there any students who were not captured, and students in the new intake of infants as well in 2021, we would be able to supply because we know that we will always have a vulnerable portion of the society who need the help of the Government to do that. And so that means test went out, those are being processed, new devices are being procured at this time to be able to continually meet the need, and there will always be a need. Because we have students who have devices, they will need to update their devices, a device may have broken and that is another thing that we are working with, sensitization of our students and our parents to take good care of the devices that have been provided.

In 2020, we also worked with the ISPs, the Internet service providers to offer zero-rated access to the school learning management system—that is the MOE's platform, and they did that. They have also offered low-cost data packages for families, the Internet service providers—we would have provided them with some of the names of some of the vulnerable families that we would have gotten from

the schools. And so they were able to offer low- cost data packages to families as well to be able to assist in meeting that digital gap, that divide that exists all over the world because of the situation with COVID-19. And so it is indisputable, it is factual, there is evidence that the Government has addressed and continues to address the inequity in accessing virtual education that is a facet of education in the pandemic.

I move to the issue of the management of precious resources, precious resources, Madam Speaker, which are allocated towards school-related services and assistance to students for post-secondary education. I want to back up just a bit as I speak to GATE.

In 2016 the GATE Task Force was set up, set up to investigate the value for money that we would receive from the GATE programme. And this is in the context that most of the recipients, most of the beneficiaries of the GATE programme at that time were persons who fall into the middle to high income group of our society. Let me repeat that, most of the persons who were benefiting from GATE at that time were persons from the middle to high income groups of society. In addition, looking at the situation with GATE and looking at the regional and international situation we found in that GATE Task Force Report that many governments in both developed and developing countries had found it necessary to reduce their public funding of tertiary education because many governments were feeling the effects of reduced revenue at that time.

In addition, Trinidad and Tobago was found to be the only country in the English speaking Caribbean which currently provided free education for tertiary students at that time. The only country in the English speaking Caribbean— Barbados used to do it they stopped between 2014 and '15 as well because of the same reasons. And so, that task force took an in-depth look at that GATE

programme and who was benefiting. They looked at the fact that we were closest to the Canadian model in which the State and the students share the funding for education. Different from say Scandinavia where you have the State paying for all of the education up to post-grad but the point is their tax level is 40 to 50 per cent where ours is 25 per cent, right? And so we looked at that fact—at that sharing arrangement and the GATE Task Force would have introduced at that time and recommended, Cabinet agreed that in 2016 we use a means test to allow for the Government to focus the investment in tertiary level funding for students, focus it on those who needed it most and that is critical and that is what we speak about effective management and proper management of scarce and precious resources. Because it is not a little bit of money that is expended in GATE, it is quite a lot of money and in addition to the GATE funding we also have to recognize that the Government supports the university, supports all of our schools, so it is not unlimited funding and when you have situations as was faced in 2016, where you have to now count your pennies even more stringently, one has to ensure that those who need it the most are taken care of.

Madam Speaker, it is important to note that between 2016 to 2021 this country has expended more than \$2.5 billion on GATE alone—this is not money for the universities; this is simply GATE and has benefited 150,000 students. With respect to scholarships, we have awarded approximately 1,700 scholarships between 2016 and 2021 expending over \$800 million just in that programme. In 2020, we introduced the National Bursary Programme and what that did, Madam Speaker, prior to 2020, 400 scholarships would be offered. As of 2020, when this was introduced we were now able to assist 600 students instead of 400, because we were offering 100 scholarships based on merit alone and 500 bursaries based on not just merit but also need and also, the course of study and its alignment to the

development strategy of Trinidad and Tobago and that is significant because we could help more students, we could ensure that the development needs of the country are met and we could target the funding to those who need it the most. In times where you do not have a lot of funding, Madam Speaker, proper management ensures that you have to give it where it is most needed. And so, the GATE programme would have been restructured to focus again on those who need it the most. That scholarship programme, that investment for our students in tertiary education, that would have also been refocused to help more students and to help the ones that need it the most.

School feeding and transport. This has been ongoing, ongoing initiatives in our schools. We have expended approximately \$600 million on these two initiatives over 2016 to 2021. Madam Speaker, this is an extensive programme in school feeding alone, 45 thousand meals are supplied weekly, throughout the schools in Trinidad and Tobago and it is something that is important for many of our citizens and the Government does not take that lightly, nor have we made any move to stop that in our schools to assist the most vulnerable students.

Infrastructural repairs to schools because that speaks to the services in our schools that ensure that they are fit for purpose for our students. Over \$800 million expended between 2016 to 2021 and that speaks only to repairs, it does not speak to new construction because if you were to add that in, that is at least another \$500 million that would have been expended for infrastructural repairs to schools. So, if we look at the entire picture, we are looking at just in these four areas over 4 to \$5 billion expended on these services. So, when we speak to the question and the Motion speaks to adequate resources being placed in these areas, Madam Speaker, I submit that adequate resources have been put to these areas, not only that but the management of these resources has been refined to ensure that those who need the

help the most receive that help.

I want to speak to the fact that the Government has taken the most important step in providing equitable access to education and that is in the phased physical reopening of our schools. Madam Speaker, it is no secret that it has been two years since some of our student have attended school physically and that continues for some of our youngest students. That lack of physical attendance disproportionately affects the most vulnerable students and there are numerous studies which show that. Where you have students that do not have—and we are not even speaking about devices here and connectivity, we are speaking about even the living circumstances of some of our students, not necessarily those who are low income but in some cases our students just do not live in circumstances that allow them to have the type of supervision, that allow them to have the type of atmosphere that is conducive to study and that is why one of the main things that even the UN speaks to in terms of providing equitable access is getting our schools physically reopened so that our students can attend school. And this is especially important to the case of our special needs students.

Madam Speaker, I met with our stakeholders today and we meet with them regularly to speak with them and to see what is happening at our schools, and they have spoken to the fact that they are very grateful for the fact that school is opening phase by phase allowing the students to come out, because they as the ones on the ground understand most critically what it means for some of our students who have not been to school, who cannot be in school, and they understand the important social structure that is really developed in school for our children. So they are very, very, very supportive of the efforts to reopen school.

I want to focus a little bit on our special needs education because that is a burning issue and it has been for many years. That is not between 2015 and 2021,

that is something that has been a problem in our country for years and we have not yet gotten to the point where we can say it is perfect, that is a fact, Madam Speaker. And though the system may be in place that should operate in a way that would assist our students, there are needs for resources in our special needs sector and we need to face that and address it; that is being addressed. One of the burning needs would be aides for our students because we have many students who need the services of a student aide to be able to function in the school environment, and that is something that is being looked at. We are working with the Ministry of Labour on the OJT programme to provide in the interim some support for those students who are on the waiting list. It may not be the perfect solution but it is better than having our students not enter the system. We have had students out of the system for many years and this is not as the Member said, this is not dealing with any one government, it is something we have to face as a country and so we have to incrementally do better as we move along dealing with our special needs students. And that is something we are working on and we expect to have some aides—more aides coming on to get some more of our students into school as we open physically, so that our students can be taken care of.

Physical attendance at our schools, Madam Speaker. We have been phasing in this physical attendance which is so important in providing the equity in access to education. We have been phasing this since February 2021, and we have had our upper school students coming out, we are at the point now, we took a very big step in 2022 to bring out a lot more of our student population. The Standard 5s are out, our Forms 1 to 3 are out on rotation. And I want to indicatee Madam Speaker, that a big part of getting our students to come out to school would be the management of the COVID-19 circumstances and situation in the country and I want to thank Ministry of Health for providing that management that allows us to do this, and it

is a synergistic relationship because if that is not managed, then we could not have brought our children back out without any prospect of their safety.

We have vaccines for our children, and that is one of the things that was being asked for all the time, to allow them to get back into the physical environment because we recognized, Madam Speaker, that that is where the equity lies, that is the basis of it, and if our students are out, then we can work on the other things that require working on. And so, we have our students out, Madam Speaker, even the issue of uniform relaxation, that is something that was proffered in our schools to our students, and we said listen, let it not be that you do not have a uniform, understanding the socio economic concerns of this pandemic time. Let it not be that a uniform deters you from coming out to school. And so, we have students coming out—I have been visiting schools, they have on whatever they have to get to school, and parents are doing their best to send them out. And that is one of the main areas—that is one of the barriers that we have to get over in terms of equity of education, getting our children out to physical school. If we look around globally, Madam Speaker, children are out to school, there are very few countries where children are not back at school and so, we have to ensure that we give our children that same chance of success.

We are also looking at all of the data available from studies that have been done and what we are getting from our own schools. And the data suggests that schools are not super spreaders of the COVID-19 virus. One of the largest studies published just in February 2022, very recent study, where they looked at a year-long set of data from two states, over one million children and they looked at the social distancing and how that affected the spread of COVID, and one of their conclusions was that less than three feet distancing did not impact on a large increase in the spread of COVID-19. And that is significant for us to look at as we

consider the transition back to the physical classroom. Because one of the things that causes a real complexity at this point in time, is the fact that the schools cannot accommodate all of the students they used to if there is social distancing of three feet, which the CDC recommends, or even six feet. So when we speak to getting back to normalcy, we have to also consider those things that—if there is social distancing, we are going to end up still having that type of rotation which does not benefit our students in having a full five-day week of school.

So, all of these things are being considered as we take our students back on this transition to the classroom, which is the major thing that will restore some level of equity in access to education. And, Madam Speaker, I can say this, unless there is some major change in health circumstances, and we do not know what is coming up but unless there is some major change, our students are on the road back to physical school and we are not turning back. It is very, very easy to look back at what was—and I am reminded of the children of Israel almost when they had to go through the wilderness to the Promised Land but, Madam Speaker, the wilderness may be difficult and this time here of transition is indeed difficult. Our stakeholders, they are very frank and honest about their challenges, our parents—we have parent/teacher associations, principals associations, denominational boards. As a government, we have our challenges too, in terms of resources and funding. So yes, it is difficult, this is a wilderness period. But this is necessary for us to take our children through back to our classrooms.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Madam Speaker, one of the important things is that even though we are going back to the classroom, we are not going back as we were before. There is the fact that having come this way, having made these digital leaps, we cannot go back to exactly what we had before. So the digital

transformation of the Ministry is critical, it is happening and therefore, we have to put things in place—human resource most importantly, to be able to manage it and to carefully craft it so that it is beneficial to all of our students.

We set out to establish an Educational Technology Unit in the Ministry of Education in 2021. I am happy to say that we do now have staff in that unit. And so that unit can now take on the task of the digital transformation where we needed that human resource, critical human resource to be able to do that. So, we are working with the Ministry of Digital Transformation, we are at the point of award, Madam Speaker, for the eBooks and numeracy solution. The numeracy solution is an adaptive learning solution to put into our schools that need it the most, where the students can benefit from that focused and one on one treatment to boost their literacy and their numeracy. And that is important, because we speak about the learning loss that has been established as a factor of the—to COVID-19 pandemic and their absence from the classroom. And that is one of the things that we must put in place to deal with it—there are other things, but we are working on that and that is at the point of award.

eBook system, Madam Speaker, that is another critical thing, we have to move past the physical, we have to get into that space where our students are comfortable and so, we are at the point of award with that, working very closely with the Ministry of Digital Transformation on that.

The Member spoke to the digital record keeping and the fact that we need records; that is a critical thing. And coming from our stakeholders as well are the cries that the Ministry is asking for so much data. But we are also working with our IT department to implement systems in the school, from as fundamental as the attendance register, to allow that information to be gathered digitally and therefore, for us to be able to analyse this data digitally. And so, we can see trends, patterns,

things that did not exist before, these are the things that we now have to implement. And these things take time, they take effort because we have to do them properly, but they are now there. So we are now piloting an online attendance register in our schools—a system. We are piloting that in 28 schools and the learnings from that will allow us to apply that across the system. And that is extendable to collecting data from examinations and all of the different data that we need, so when you put it into the system, we can manipulate that data to get the type of information we need to assist in our policy directions. So, it is a little more difficult now because not everything is digital, a lot of things are manual however, we are moving to that digital point.

Madam Speaker, I want to speak to the threats a little bit in terms of our ability to offer quality education. And these threats have existed all the time and we face them now and we have to deal with them in different ways. Challenges of resources to the Government, that is a fact. We cannot close our eyes to the fact that we do not have all the resources at our disposal that we would like to have, and therefore, it is a matter of prioritizing where we apply these resources to be able to make the most impact.

Another challenge is the fact that our students have to learn to live in this brave new world, where they have to take personal responsibility for their safety. So, we have to keep encouraging—and that is one of the challenges our stakeholders mentioned, the challenge of encouraging our students, reminding our students, you know, wear your masks, sanitize, do not social—do not congregate, make sure and keep your distance. That is a fact that would threaten because if our students do not do that, then we can have many of them sick at the same time. It causes challenges in the school—when our teachers are on quarantine, students are

on quarantine and all of these are challenges to us, offering this equitable level of education to all of our students.

Our parents, our parents and the input of parents, I think this COVID has really highlighted how important it is and our parents are mentioned in the Education Act, they have a role in the education of our children. But in many cases, that was not seen to be as important as we have seen it in the COVID. So, we know now, that it is critical and if our parents do not continue to take that role, we will not have the kind of success in the education sector that we need.

We also are threatened by some teachers who may not be doing the needful. And this is not across the board, this is not general, these are exceptions to the rule. Because Madam Speaker, by and large, our teachers have really stepped up to the plate, they have given yeoman—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:—and continue to give yeoman service, right. And so, those who are not doing the best they can, of course that will threaten the system.

School violence, and allow me to spend a minute on this. We have seen school violence once again rearing its head—that is not a surprise. It was there before and it will be there after. And what we are seeing in addition to that, something that is also not a surprise, we have seen parents, parents indulging in violence with students. And I say today, if our parents are doing this, Madam Speaker, what do we leave for our children? This is not a Ministry of Education problem, this is a societal problem; our schools are a microcosm of our society. And when there is violence in our society, we cannot expect the schools to be exempt. But we must do something and I meet with the Minister of National Security, the Minister of Youth Development and National Service, because we must come up with a strategy to deal with that.

So, Madam Speaker, I know I must have very little time left but I want to say that the Government has been working very hard practically, aggressively—I want to thank the teachers, principals, stakeholders, for helping us in dealing with this most important challenge of accessing and allowing our children to access, equitable quality education. It is a work in progress, we continue to work hard. Thank you, Madam Speaker for the opportunity to contribute.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Siparia.

Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC (*Siparia*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for permitting me to join in this debate on a Motion brought by my colleague, the Member of Parliament for Tabaquite. I want to endorse her statements in this House today in connection with the Motion before the House.

At the outset, Madam Speaker, I want to make it very clear and I think no one would deny the statement of fact that education is the only passport out of poverty. Education is the only key to a better quality of life. And I can say that on a personal level as many of us sitting in this House and elsewhere, can attest. I came from very humble origins, Madam Speaker, as many of us did. And it was only because of education, that I was able to overcome some of the very humbling experiences from a very humble origin. And so, I have spent a lot of my life in public life, advocating for education, for and on behalf of students—the famous song, you know, we—“...believe that children are our future”. And at the moment from what we are seeing happening in the education sector, indeed as in almost every sector in our country, everything is in shambles. Education sector, health sector, national security, everything is in shambles. And whilst I share some of the comments made by my hon. colleague on the other side, the hon. Minister, it seems to me that after going into seven years, the Minister is telling us it is a work in

progress, it is ongoing on so many of the issues. And I really would have liked for the Minister to share with us her ministerial responses to many issues raised in two Joint Select Committee Reports which were laid in this Parliament, which addressed issues about devices, which addressed issues about special needs children, which addressed several other issues, violence in schools. And in those JSC reports, a lot of work was done, they were laid in this House last year 2021, and several findings were made by that JSC as well as several recommendations were made to improve the education sector and of course the learning for our children.

The Minister has not in my respectful view, in any way given a ministerial response, I have checked on the Parliament's website—we have been checking, we see no ministerial response as required under these JSC reports and I thought the Minister might have taken an opportunity to address some of the concerns there because there are very serious concerns, which I will come to in a moment. However, the Minister has 60 days in which so to do, but I thought with this Motion, the Minister could have given us her responses to the concerns, to the findings and to the recommendations for improvement of the sector.

The Minister spent some time talking about value for money. The Minister spoke about devices and that report did address the issue of devices. The Minister mentioned GATE and I will come back to it. The Minister talked about scholarships, which I will come to as well. Minister talked about— Minister spoke about special needs students, that was also addressed in those reports. And the Minister talked about adequate resources being spent and I do not know which numbers the Minister has or which data Minister has based her comments on, because if we look at the data given by the Government, this Government in the various budget statements, in the SSIP which is very detailed for the social sector

investment programme into education, very detailed statistics are given which in my respectful view, again, are not in tandem with the numbers or the stats that the Minister is quoting. And I will speak about some of these in the time left. So again, thank you very much.

The Motion we have here before this House is one that really seeks to address several fronts about inequity in the system:

“Whereas”—the Motion is telling us:

“the Government has failed to address existing inequities in accessing education, exacerbated by the shift to virtual learning;

...Government has failed to provide safe learning spaces following its sudden decision to institute in-person classes for some students;

...Government has failed to meet the varied requirements of teachers leaving many ill-equipped to execute quality online instruction;

...the Government has failed to effectively manage resources to facilitate adequate funding to the GATE programme, government sponsored scholarships and bursaries, school feeding”—what was known as the—
“school feeding programme...”

—now I think it is the National Dietary Services.

“...special education access and other school related services;”

And so, we are asking this House to take:

“...note of the increasing and unacceptable levels of disparity in inequitable access to education and the failure of the Ministry of Education to deliver on its essential mandate;”

And we are calling on Government:

“...to take all immediate and necessary steps to provide equitable access to all students.”

This is the Motion filed by the hon. Member for Tabaquite, our colleague on this side.

Now, Minister did attempt to address some of these as I started off saying, but I thought we would have got more responses as to what steps the Minister intends to take. Minister seemed to be giving historic data, some of which I do not agree with based on the statistics available from the Government. Giving historic data, “we have done this, we have done that, we spent this, we spent adequate resources” and so on. But these are issues that are still outstanding in the Motion as worded, and in my respectful view the Minister has not said what they will do.

3.00 p.m.

The Motion calls on the Government—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—to take all immediate and necessary steps to provide equitable access to all students. Did I hear wrong? From listening to the Minister—I listened attentively, and I did not hear the Minister speak about, as we go forward. What is the Minister going to do? What is the Government going to do to deal with the inequities in education sector?

So the pandemic, in my respectful view, again, has only exacerbated the situation, the decline in education sector. And again, the stats that I have and the data that I have, I will attempt to show that that evidence will reveal that it was not just COVID and the pandemic that has destroyed or is destroying the education sector. That sector was destroyed even before the COVID came in.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So from cutting GATE, scholarships, closing tertiary education campuses, refusing to complete works on schools, several schools all over the country—the Minister spoke about repairs to schools but these

schools have been shut. As we say, vine is growing on it and all kinds of vermin live in these premises. Schools, almost complete, way ready to go, six going on seven years, nothing has been done. So to talk about adequate resources, with my most respectful thinking on it, this is not the truth, this is not the reality. And I am of the respectful view, again, that the Minister's contribution here today is far from reality of what is happening out there in the education sector. It is way, way outside.

And so, what we will get from this is the legacy of this Government, Madam Speaker, will be a lost generation of children, our children, because of what has happened in the education sector. Yes, we know about funding and we do not have enough funding and so on, but it is always a question of priority. And I am of the respectful view, again, that our children, our students, the future generations, the future leaders of this country, they should be given priority above other matters in which money is being spent. That has not happened under this Government.

I hear the cry of the Minister, "Well, we would like to get more resources," and so on, but when we sit there as a government, as a Cabinet, what is your priority? Is your priority to give \$23 million for rental somewhere or is your priority to get the devices for the children? What is your priority? Taste of Carnival, building goat pens? Whatever it is that you are doing, what is the priority? Our children should be given priority number one, priority number two and priority number three—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—because we will be lost and they will be lost. So let us look at every level. The education sector is in shambles.

Let us start with first, tertiary education. The Minister spoke about GATE, spoke about scholarships. I want to remind this honourable House, Madam, that

under the government I led, when we went into government, the tertiary education sector had a participation rate of 42 per cent. We set ourselves a target of 60 per cent participation rate in the tertiary sector. We surpassed our own target and, indeed, achieved over 65.2 per cent—left 62.5 per cent.

So let us look at GATE then. There are two things happening with GATE: one is that students—the number of students accessing GATE has declined drastically. And again, that is again talking about equitable distribution, equity in the system. The Minister says, “Well, okay, the children who were getting that, they were from middle and upper income.” I want to ask the Minister this: When it is that as at June 2015, 59,605 students were accessing GATE, under my government—that is the last full year we had in office—and now that we come to 2021, 21,000 students about accessing GATE. Are you then telling me that those 59,000 and minus the over 38,000 that are no longer able to access GATE, that they were all middle class and high class, high income? Can that be true? And I am not of the view that that is true. The decline in funding for GATE is illustrated by the drastic decline in the number of students accessing GATE.

When you come to the expenditure, our last year in office, we spent \$650 million on GATE. All of this is coming, Madam, from the budget books that we get each year presented in this House. By the time we get down to this Government, for 2021, 400,000 being spent on GATE and so GATE was slashed with a cut from 2015 by 250,000, with a slash of 38,202 students cut from getting GATE—they were not getting GATE. And therefore, I am not satisfied that the Minister was saying previously, you were only giving high-class and high income—I think that is the word used—and middle income students. But this is a tremendous cut; 38,000 students cut out from accessing GATE and we want to talk about adequate resources and adequate funding. So thousands of students would

have been disenfranchised.

And this thing about the bursaries and so on, more students getting bursaries. That is what the Minister was saying, more students getting bursaries. Yes, that may be so but then you come to the scholarships, Madam, you come to scholarships. And again, a drastic reduction in the number of scholarships. Under my government, the total scholarships, last full year, 1,873 scholarships. In that year, we had a record high of 400 national scholarships. So 1,873 students accessing scholarships.

You know, I find it a kind of hypocrisy or maybe we see things differently in different places. I think the Prime Minister would have understood how important a national scholarship is because the Prime Minister's own daughter got a national scholarship, yet you came to cut national scholarships from 400 to 100. And the explanation, again, you are giving more but it is what quality, what quantity. We must not only take care of the lesser privileged but we must also take care of the brightest. And that is what the scholarships were about, that the brightest of our "brights", they would be getting these scholarships but instead, you have cut the funding and you have cut the number of scholarships. So again, where is the equity and the spreading to make sure that our best students would be able to get these scholarships? Minister, I know when the statement came out, they were giving bursaries and so on, many editorials in the newspaper really blasted the Government about this cut in the number of scholarships that were being given.

Then we come to, Madam, in the early childhood—so the tertiary sector has been gutted. We come to the early childhood sector and I think the Minister may have mentioned early childhood. Again, we built, under my government, 65 new Early Childhood Care and Education Centres. We left plans for some about 32 additional centres. As at fiscal 2014, last full year, there were 10,000 places for

these children between the ages one to three. Now, this is a very important sector. The Jesuits have a saying, they say, “Give me a child from age one to seven and I will give you the man.” What that meant was that those are the most formative years of a person’s life, of a child’s life to become an adult.

Instead, we see here, again, expenditure for grants for the expansion of ECCE. Those have been drastically cut. Grants to Servol for ECCE, early childhood, that has also been cut. So on all levels, we have cut it. And when we come to ECCE centres, I really would like to know how many you built. I know we built about—what was it? About nearly 85 or 96, if I am not mistaken, early childhood, and had those in train to be rebuilt. Can you tell me if you have built any early childhood centres in the almost seven years you have been there?

I want to go to the report, Madam, and I want to talk about a headline this week, early, in the *Guardian*, the front page, earlier this week, “Terror in the classroom”, and the reports of the violence in the schools, horrendous scenes and even videos being posted and so on, that many would be scared to send their children to school because of the violence there. But that report I mentioned earlier, in the few minutes I have left, which is the first Report of the JSC on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity: equal access and underperformance of Port of Spain schools—and this was laid in this House on 24 November, 2021, and the key findings here—the Committee’s findings:

“The Committee found that there were no Curriculum Officers for Special Education and Special Education School Supervisors in the MOE.

The Committee found that there was a lack of professionals and semi-professionals required to staff interdisciplinary teams and transdisciplinary teams in schools...”—especially—“Special Schools and”—other schools.

“The Committee found that according to APASS, the framework of the

MOE does not...monitor behaviour and attitudes required by the schools for its students, teachers and staff...”

And then they talked about the “School Climate”—coming back to the issue of the violence in schools—terror in the classroom. And, you know, I think all of us this week have been horrified where the crime is totally out of control. So violence in the schools as well. And I share my condolences with all the bereaved families, including the Moses family, for that horrendous murder that took place this week. I share condolences for them of the high levels of crime and violence. The committee said:

“High levels of crime and violence that occur in some of the communities...

Insufficient staff to facilitate psychosocial/psychoeducational Screening.

Insufficient intervention services to meet the needs of those screened.

Teacher longevity in schools affected by high incidences of violence in and around schools.

Limited funding and less resources provided to schools for challenging issues.

Population size...

Lack of specialised teachers...”

So, what does the Minister have to say about all of this coming out of the JSC report? They gave many recommendations. Have any of these recommendations been put into place? That is what I would like to know from the Minister.

So it is all well and good to say, we spent adequate resources, we are limited in resources, X, Y, P and Q, but then what are you going to do? That is what this Motion is calling for: calling upon the Government, calling upon the Minister—what steps are you going to take to deal with this violence in the schools? What

steps are you going to take for the underfunding in GATE? What steps are you going to take with respect to underfunding for the scholarships? What steps are you taking to make the education sector better and to make them safer—a safer environment for our children in the schools? What are your steps? Please read the JSC report. They have given you recommendations. Have any of these recommendations been carried through?

And then there is a second JSC Report on Social Services and Public Administration: effects of the hybrid/blended learning system. Really damaging. The Minister talks about the devices. They talk about that one point in time, 60,000 devices. How many have been given? Now, you say 24, 25,000. Where can I find that data? Which book tells me? Which part of the data put out by Government? Where is it? It talks about trying to make up—now, while some have devices, they have no Internet connectivity. Some have Internet connectivity, they have no devices, and that totals in the JSC report here to about 69,000 children. That is what the report is saying, put out last November. What has changed from since last November as this report is saying to now? What has changed and what is intended to do?

The Minister talked about the digital world and whatever. Yes, we have no problem. It must be—we must change the technology, we must change how we go forward. And so, with those words, Madam, I thank you very much for the time. God bless you all and have a great day. Thank you so much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Ayanna Webster-Roy): Madam Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity to make a brief intervention. Before I go into the details, Madam Speaker, I want to take the opportunity to extend my sincere gratitude to all educators. I want to thank them for their

patience, their dedication, their commitment as well as the ability to go beyond the call of duty to ensure that our nation's children—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy:—would have been able to pursue their learning despite the challenges.

Madam Speaker, these are indeed unprecedented times and apart from those who are educators by profession, I want to also signal my thanks to those parents and guardians who would have become proxy teachers, teachers in the bedroom, teachers in the living room and teachers even in the kitchen, while our children, because of the pandemic, were forced to be at home and to pursue their learning at home. And I want to extend my gratitude to those parents and guardians who worked alongside with the Government and the educators to ensure that their children remained in the classroom, be it virtual, and were able to access their education.

And I want to recognize the children of Trinidad and Tobago, and I want to recognize them because of their resilience. Our boys and girls, despite the challenges of the pandemic, have demonstrated that we in Trinidad and Tobago are able to produce children who can face the storms of time and triumph over them, Madam Speaker. As the Minister with responsibility for gender and child affairs I am indeed proud of all those boys and girls who, despite the pandemic, would have been able to sit the SEA, sit their various exams—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster- Roy:—and still come out successful, still demonstrate that they were able to learn and they were able to adapt to the changing times.

And last but not least, I also want to signal those community-based organizations, faith-based organizations, NGOs and even individuals who, during

the time of the pandemic and when we were in the periods of lockdown, were able to assist the Government by providing nutrition to vulnerable boys and girls in communities so that they were able to have a full belly to be able to accept what was being presented to them, either be it virtually or by the resources provided by the Ministry of Education in the newspapers, so that they could continue to learn.

Madam Speaker, while I do not agree with the tone of the Motion, as the Minister with responsibility for gender and child affairs, I appreciate and understand the sentiments, the intent and the purpose behind the Motion. The Motion is indeed important.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

The mover of the Motion, in her deliberations, emphatically stated that the time for action is now, and I agree, Mr. Deputy Speaker. At the time the Motion was placed on the Order Paper, there was an urgent and critical need for intervention and action by the State, by the private sector, by the NGOs, by every right-thinking citizen in Trinidad and Tobago to ensure that our children were able to access education in the right manner.

Since then, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have systematically taken steps to improve the educational outcomes of our boys and girls given our current circumstances and given the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. And my colleague, Minister of Education, would have outlined some of the actions taken by Government since then to ensure that we have more equitable access to education and to ensure that our boys and our girls are able to pursue their educational goals in their own space, in their own time, so that it would be able to redound to their future development.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago's education system and sector, while not perfect, is amongst the best in the region—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy:—and I could say that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, with a clear conscience. The data would show, the statistics would show that despite our challenges, our education system is amongst the best in the region. And this did not happen by chance, Mr. Deputy Speaker. As a matter of fact, the foundation for this was laid on the occasion of our Independence when the founding father would have said that, “The future of our nation lies in the book bags of our children.” And in saying that, he would have placed a call to action for future policymakers and future generations to ensure that at the core of our nation’s development, at the core of our development thrust, education would be given a place of priority. And policymakers over the years would have responded to this call systematically, laying a foundation for access to free education from nursery to tertiary.

When Trinidad and Tobago signed and ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, all nations further signalled a commitment to placing the rights of our children at the top of the development agenda. From 1989 to now, successive governments have systematically worked to ensure that the various Articles entrenched and enshrined in the UNCRC would have become part of government policies, programmes and practice.

Article 28, in particular, has always been a priority for PNM governments and other governments in Trinidad and Tobago. Article 28 of the UNCRC says:

“that children and young people have the right to education no matter who they are: regardless of race, gender or disability; if they’re in detention...”

All children must have access to education.

I have seen where children in some jurisdictions, even without the added stresses of the impact of the pandemic, have struggled to access educational opportunities because of lack of spaces, because of lack of financial resources or

even because of crime being a deterrent to them pursuing their educational goals. We have been fortunate in Trinidad and Tobago to be able to respond to economic stressors and shocks in such a manner that has allowed us to be able to continue providing educational opportunities for all in this country, either free or subsidized. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you take into consideration our economic circumstances and our decline in revenues, you would understand how difficulty it would have been for us to ensure that we continue to provide for our citizens access to education, free or subsidized.

The Member for Siparia would have noted about the numbers that would have been accessing GATE and other incentives under her government. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you really assess what would have happened under GATE, some persons would have been able to utilize GATE for multiple degrees, whereas some persons, because of the lack of opportunity, not having the right support—social support around them, would not have been able to pursue tertiary training. By making the programme more equitable and allowing those who are most vulnerable, most in need, to access the opportunities under GATE, we are opening it up to ensure that more citizens—although it may not seem that way—have access to tertiary education.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: While we know the efforts being made to ensure a robust education sector that is responsive to the needs of our citizens as well as the changing social and economic conditions, it is important to note that in order for us to capture the most vulnerable and ensure that we reduce the numbers of children who fall through the cracks, we need a multisector, multipronged approach. There is a role for various agencies, Ministries and Departments.

And I want to break it down, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because when we talk

about access to education, it is not just about being able to go into a classroom and being able to get the books in your bag, but ensuring that we create that enabling environment that when you go into the classroom, you are in a position that you can learn. So that those persons who are coming into the classroom to teach you, they are in a space and in a place where they are comfortable, confident enough and well within their ability to teach because all their issues would have been addressed. So, in that vein, there is a role for labour; for labour to ensure that those persons who are educators, working within the system, that their needs are met, so that when they go into the classroom, they come from a place where they are comfortable enough, they are emotionally stable enough to be able to teach and pass on knowledge to children in the best way possible.

There is place and a role for health, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We have to ensure that our citizens are healthy enough so that they would be able to access educational opportunities, not only healthy enough, but that parents are meeting the mandates and the milestone as it pertains to health, so that children can enter into the education sector and be able to pursue their training. So in terms of health, it is ensuring that not only that vaccines are provided for our children so that they can enter into the primary school system but also for those boys and girls and even for teachers who may have mental health issues that the right interventions are available. And this Government over the years, Mr. Deputy Speaker, would have been working systematically to identify the various gaps, be it in health, be it in labour, be it in social welfare, so that we get the best outcomes for our children.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in terms of social intervention, there is a role for the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to play to ensure that we have the safety nets in place so that families are stabled enough and well supported enough so that the children can go on and pursue their education, and that

households are well supported in terms of food, in terms of other needs, so that the children would be able to access whatever resources are available.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is even a role for the Gender and Child Affairs Division and I want to speak specifically to the National Children's Registry which is very critical. I must admit that the registry was a vision of the former government led by the Member for Siparia and it was a vision that would have been embraced by this administration. We would have developed the National Children's Registry. We are now at the stage where we would have recently held a soft launch and tested the system. Now, what this registry does, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that it provides government and various agencies information on our children. So through collaborations thus far with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education, we would have been populating the registry with information of all the children in Trinidad and Tobago.

What is critical about this registry, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is the fact that the registry will enable government to track accomplishments and milestones for children. So, for example, if a child has been immunized, if a child has been enrolled in school by the statutory age or if a child has been promoted to a higher class, at the time they should be promoted, if those milestones are not met, the registry will then trigger an alert that will prompt the Ministry of Education or a relevant agency to intervene to see what factors would be impacting that child from being able to access education and starting school. So, for example, if an alert is raised where a child has not been promoted then education can then, through their Student Support Services, decide if it is that the child may have maybe a learning disability, through the necessary intervention, if it is that the child may not be promoted because of other social factors—maybe at home they do not have access to enough food at home or at home there may be instances of abuse where maybe

an agency such as the Children's Authority would need to respond or any other agency. So through the National Children's Registry, we will be creating opportunity for alerts to be made and create a whole-of-government response to the needs of children.

In addition, the National Children's Registry will serve as an effective mechanism for communication amongst practitioners across education, health, social care and national security and foster inter-Ministry, inter-agency collaboration. For example, if a child is absent from school for a prolonged period, the National Children's Registry system can do checks to determine if that child is away because that child may be in the hospital or if that child has left the country. Now, if in an investigation we recognize that the child is not in the hospital and the child is not out of the country, and the relevant agencies would have been notified, then the registry will prompt that alert again and cause the various agencies to start the investigation and intervene so that we could account for that child and ensure that the best interventions are made available to get that child back into school and back into learning and to ensure the possible long-term outcome for that boy or girl.

Another notable capability of the NCR is the ability to generate reports. The NCR would assist in collating statistics, sharing and archiving information and report generation would assist in national planning which would be helpful in early intervention programmes. So, for example, if we are seeing where in a particular community or geographic region that a lot of children are not going to school, they are not progressing beyond primary or secondary education, then you could cause the different agencies to develop the right programmes so that we could get them to move ahead instead of just dropping out of school or staying at primary or secondary; cause Government to develop the right programmes and intervention to

motivate and encourage that particular community to get their children into tertiary training.

It is imperative for us to understand that for our children to be able to fully utilize the resources available, we must have that all of government approach where every Ministry or department is communicating to ensure timely intervention, so that whatever resources that would be needed, would be made available but most importantly, whatever issues that may be affecting a child, boy or girl, that those issues would be resolved.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, another development coming out of the Gender and Child Affairs Division is our U-Report. I think most of us would agree that it is unfair for us to develop policies and programmes for children without having their voices and opinions accounted for.

3.30 p.m.

So the UReport is a platform that would allow government agencies, Departments and Ministries to be able to poll children—poll our young people to understand what are their main concerns, what are the things that you want to see and help us to respond accordingly. The mover of the Motion noted how important it is for us to look at the way we embrace technology in the classroom and that is true. We need to listen to the voices of our boys and girls because some may be saying, “In the classroom I would want to be able to use my device.” Some may be saying, “I cannot learn on my device”, but when we poll our children, we get to understand what are the various needs and then we make our programmes to suit—to suit the various needs of our young people. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Motion is indeed important. If we fail to safeguard our children’s right to education then we would be failing the basic tenet on which this nation was developed, which is ensuring that we use our children—their education to drive development, to

position Trinidad and Tobago as the leader, as the beacon of the Caribbean.

So it is important for us to really dissect the various issues around education and access to education, but more importantly it speaks to us having a serious meaningful conversation around ensuring that all sectors work—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, you have two more minutes.

Hon. A. Webster-Roy:—in harmony to ensure that we create an enabling environment for persons to access the opportunities. And in creating that enabling environment we must speak to health doing their part; we must speak to social development doing their part; we must speak to our faith-based organizations, community-based organizations doing their part to ensure that the child at the micro level within their home, that the needs of the child, the needs of the family are fully met so that those boys and girls, those young persons could then be so empowered to go out, access opportunities available, make full use of them and then go on to contribute to national development and changing and shaping Trinidad and Tobago into the place that we all will want it to be. I thank you for this opportunity, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre and, Member, you have 20 minutes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. David Lee (Pointe-a-Pierre): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to join this debate. This is a very important Motion brought by my colleague and I want to compliment her, the Member for Tabaquite for bringing a timely Motion on education, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It has been on the Order Paper for a little while and I think the Minister of Education referred to that but we found it was important for our Private Members' Day in February to address this Motion,

Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, when I go through the Motion itself, the different preambles, it really strikes and really talks about—and the Opposition really wants to bring out and have a debate on the education aspect and what has been happening. Now my good friend, the Minister of Education—I mean, I think she is a good friend to me—really and truly the issues that have been happening in the education sector were started, I think under her predecessor and she has to take—the Minister of Education has to bear the brunt of what has happened in the first five years under this PNM Government, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So I really hope—and I understand her dilemma in the Ministry of Education.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you look at the Ministry of Education it is a very large Ministry and if you look it was structured under the PP Government. It was really split into two Ministries, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I want to ask the Government, maybe they should look at that model. I know they do not like to consider anything by the PP Government but our model was that we split the Ministry of Education into two Ministries. One was the Ministry of Education from primary to secondary, and the second Ministry was the Ministry of Tertiary Education which dealt with the tertiary level programmes, UWI, and also the tech/voc which is very critical in our society given what has been happening especially over the last six years in that whole tech/voc education system, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I listened to the Minister of Education intently when she debated and if you listened to the Minister you would think everything is good, and I know there are a lot of issues in the Ministry and I will get to it. We need to be honest about our young people in our society today, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So while it is very—this Motion is very timely, Mr. Deputy Speaker—and I will get into my contribution. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Motion today captures the severe and significant failings of this Government and, in my view, led to disastrous consequences in the

education system at present and will wreak even more catastrophic consequences in the medium and long-term. No filibustering or media conferences by the Minister of Education and her team can obfuscate the damage and the physical, emotional and mental well-being of our students, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is universally accepted that the Government has a responsibility to provide equal and equitable opportunities for all citizens to access quality education and that is part of the Motion. However, those on the other side—I really want to believe if they really do understand what is quality education, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the preamble, it talks about “equal” and “opportunity”—the phrases, “equal and equitable opportunities” and “access quality education” are meaninglessly repeated by those who do not really understand the requirements of breathing life into these important concepts, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Minister of Education and her team has been focusing on a lot of meetings and I really ask the Minister of Education to have some clarity and strategies in her approach into facing our students, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, after all that is said by the Minister of Education and all these meetings and consultations, yet all the key stakeholders are still dissatisfied with the results of these consultations. For example, the teachers, the principals, the parents, even TTUTA expressed, you know, dissatisfaction at what is happening in the Ministry of Education.

The country is bombarded by a series of education committees, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and in my view it has no real value and it will not produce any real solutions in our education dilemma. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we must look at equal and equitable opportunities for our students to access quality education from a clinical, scientific education approach, Mr. Deputy Speaker. But, you see, when

you look at the preamble again about equitable and equal opportunities and you look at the readiness of our students, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we must ask—we must really ask, “Are our students ready—in a state of readiness for our students in the education system?” When the hon. Opposition Leader was Prime Minister, the Education Minister, Dr. Tim Gopeesingh, began a project, Mr. Deputy Speaker, of understanding readiness of students to participate in their learning. There was a consultancy developed, a report developed on neurodevelopment and it was awarded to screen, test and treat approximately over 3,000 students to remedy learning impediments and efficiencies. The reports of the consultants, the work is at the Ministry of Education and I ask the Minister and her team to really look at that report because it is very valuable.

There were significant learning improvements in several spheres that enabled students to make better use of educational opportunities provided for them. Mr. Deputy Speaker, if students are not properly prepared physically, emotionally and mentally for the learning process they will never ever know the real meaning of equal and equitable opportunities. So again, are our students ready, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Mr. Deputy Speaker, just providing students with access to a physical space, a school can never result in access to quality education. In fact, Mr. Deputy Speaker, under this Government—and I want to delve a little bit into the Student Support Services Division that has been badly decimated because of unfilled vacancies. Now this Division, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is very critical, especially more so now in the society that we have. It was established—and it is on the website of the Ministry of Education—the Student Support Services Division was:

“Established in 2004...—It...delivers an array of psycho-social, educational and behavioural services for students to provide

environments...”—that—“...support their healthy development, enabling them to become...”—responsive and—“...productive citizens.”

I go on:

“The Division provides a comprehensive and well-coordinated array of psycho-social support services to students which include specialised services for children with moderate and severe Special Educational needs, behavioural issues, clinical issues and career guidance.”

It is a very important Division, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and there are a lot of vacancies that are unfilled in that Division.

Students are deprived of these professional interventions and their learning curve has tilted downwards. The Student Support Services Division, as seen on the website, is supposed to provide the following services to students enrolled at even our early child care centres and primary and secondary:

- “Guidance and Counselling
- Diagnostic/Prescriptive Services
- Social Work
- Special Education
- Behaviour Modification and Psychotherapy”

So you see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is a very critical division. It is useless to speak of these concepts without the necessary initiatives to give true meaning, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And, you know, I ask the Minister of Education, please, look at that division and strengthen it and give it the importance that I know you know that it deserves, Minister.

It is really—and when we look at impaired students, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is unpardonable this Government speak of quality education when students who are physically impaired are willfully deprived of urgent support. It is devastating

for students who are visually and hearing impaired and cannot access the required support from the Ministry of Education. Now, I listened to the Minister of Education and she mentioned—the Minister mentioned about special needs schools and I agree with her, wholeheartedly, and the importance of that. And I want to put a plug, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because back in 2015, before the PP Government demitted office, there was a plan for a special needs school in the Pointe-a-Pierre area of Macaulay; a special needs school for the children, not only of Pointe-a-Pierre but the surrounding communities where there was a special need. Now, her predecessor shelved that school. The contract was already awarded and so forth and it was shelved by this Government. So, I ask the Minister to revisit the special needs school that the contract was awarded because I know the Minister knows the importance of special needs schools, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you look at the virtual learning aspect in this Motion, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I want to say that under the PP Government technology in education was vital. We have said it; it is out there in the public domain, whether this present Government wants to admit that or not. The PP Government was always about virtual learning and technology, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Lee: Technology included not only the provisions for laptops for our Form 1 students every year but learning materials such as textbooks and software and well-organized training for educators, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because it is here in the Motion to expand in information technology education. And what did this Government do, they stopped the laptop procurements, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And even, you know—and trying to get back given what happened in the pandemic over the last two years, the Ministry of Education had to end up reaching out to the

business community and literally begging the business community to help the Government purchase devices for our students, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And that was the start; I am not blaming it on this Minister of Education, it was started on her predecessor. So that, you know, we—the PP Government had a plan about information technology that if this Government had continued, given the situation of the pandemic our students would have been well-advanced in that technology learning, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, even our textbooks the Government has not procured, based on the information I have, textbooks for our students for the past six years in spite of textbook reviews being paid to our publishers, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And what is the current situation, the current situation, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that I listened to the Minister of Education, getting back the students over the last two years. Some of her schools did not even have functioning photocopiers for those students who did not have the ability to have a device, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and that is a fact. That is a fact. You know, so I ask the Minister to, you know, let us look at the education system, the shortcomings and try to build on it, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know, so that—you know, it is well and nice to say, you know, everything appears to be fine but there are issues that have happened especially in the last two years, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So, I ask the Minister of Education to look at that model of the Ministry of Education, or even the Acting Prime Minister who is here to look at that model of the Ministry of Education and a Ministry of Tertiary Education that caters for the tech/voc issues, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you look at the preamble:

“...*whereas* the Government has failed to meet the varied requirements of teachers leaving many ill-equipped to execute quality online instruction;”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, so this part of the preamble talks about whether the teachers

have the ability to execute quality online instruction and there has been a lot of issues especially in that area of online teaching by teachers, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Some of them really do not have the—they lack the experience, the competence to do it and that is a fact. No one knows, you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker—and, you know, by that I think the education system somewhat has been paralyzed and I ask, what has been the training under this Government, under this present Minister of Education in really bringing those teachers back up to speed? Because, you see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is a blended or a hybrid situation where you have the rotation of schools, so you have some students presently attending school physically and then some are doing online classes still and I ask, are our teachers equipped to handle that blended or that hybrid approach, Mr. Deputy Speaker?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you look at the—and I listened to the Minister of Education talk about the scholarships and bursaries, you know—and the Leader of the Opposition went into that and I would not get into that again, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but, you know, you have to look at what has happened in the drastic reduction of scholarships with the increase of bursaries, and bursaries cannot replace scholarships, Mr. Deputy Speaker; it cannot. Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know, when you—and I want to address a little bit of the school feeding programme, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I have a report here on the School Feeding Programme, and the School Feeding Programme under this Government has been drastically cut over the last six years.

In 2015, the number spent on the School Feeding Programme was \$250 million; by 2020 the Government has stripped \$50 million in funding away from that programme. So in 2018 the expenditure remained low at \$203 million. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we all know especially the value of that meal to our students, especially those who come from the rural communities, the poorer areas and the

vulnerable areas, Mr. Deputy Speaker; they depend on that. And what has happened to them over the last two years, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know? And I thought that the Minister of Education would have come and said something about those students, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you look at the preamble in my colleague's Motion, especially the one done on:

“Be it resolved that this House takes note of the increasing and unacceptable of disparity in inequitable access to education and the failure of the Ministry of Education to deliver on its essential mandate;”

And that is the critical thing, that essential mandate, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because the Minister of Education continues to talk about the students who have left our education sector, especially in the last 18 months, and there has been no proper integrated system to get these students to return to school, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And we need to—the Minister of Education needs to pay some attention to those students who left for all different reasons over the last two years and we need to get them back into our school system, to get them to be well-rounded citizens. Because what has been happening is because that 16-year age group, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it creates—if you leave them out there and you do not bring them back into the school system—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, you have two more minutes.

Mr. D. Lee: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker—it can have a devastating effect on our society, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know, as I come to a close, you know, no amount of “ole talk”, no amount of filibustering, no amount of committee meetings can really do justice to our education system and give us the comfort that something is being done in our education system. So I ask the Minister of Education—I know

she means well—to really, you know, put aside and really delve into that Ministry and really look after our young people because we have seen—I saw an editorial this week, “Schools as safe zones”, and the Leader of the Opposition talked about, you know, the disasters or the fighting that is happening in schools as we go back out to classes, you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and this is a concern not only for me and the Opposition but it is a concern for all citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I come to a close, I hope—and I want to stick a plug for two schools in the Pointe-a-Pierre area. The Claxton Bay Anglican Primary School, I know it was promised to be built and I hope the Minister of Education gives it the importance that it deserves for our community of Pointe-a-Pierre and also to open back—open the early childhood centre in Marabella. I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for La Horquetta/Talparo, and you have 20 minutes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Youth Development and National Service (Hon. Foster Cummings): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for this opportunity to give a short contribution on this Motion brought by the Member for Tabaquite, and, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I think the Motion of course is well-intentioned. I think that the Member, through her presentation, made every attempt to indicate or to demonstrate a genuine interest in the education of the children of our nation and certainly we always welcome it when the Opposition acts responsibly in this Parliament. I want to take a few minutes to say to the Minister of Education and to the Ministry officials that we appreciate as a country the work that they are doing, that despite the challenges that we have faced as a result of this pandemic, as the

country and the world sought to grapple with a situation that we did not expect, and as we sought to move in the direction of what we now refer to as the “new normal”, and that as our children and our education system were forced to move in the direction of virtual learning that the Minister in the Ministry of Education did all in their power to have our students not be denied an education.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it was and still is, a very challenging time. And I should as well congratulate our teachers who rose to the occasion and were able to transition to this situation of virtual learning to the benefit of our students, to the parents, myself included, who had to adjust to assisting students and children to move into this new situation. And I know that it must have been a challenge for many because as with most things that are new there is some time to adjust.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, many of us can speak to our experience with the education system. We come from a place where many of us would have come from humble beginnings as mentioned by the Leader of the Opposition earlier on, and as a credit to the founding father of this nation and to the governments that went before, a lot of emphasis has been placed on education from that time to now. It is well known that the policy regarding free education from preschool to university is something that Trinidad and Tobago can boast about in the region and internationally and we have had significant successes in that regard. But the pandemic put us—and not only Trinidad and Tobago, as the Minister mentioned, this was a worldwide situation and still is and many of our children faced difficulties depending on the level of income available to the family. Some families would have been able to purchase devices for the children in their household and therefore those children were easily able to take part in the virtual learning.

Speakers before mentioned that the corporate Trinidad and Tobago demonstrated their commitment to national development by responding in a very

positive manner and contributing and donating devices. In my own constituency, while we made a call to corporate sponsors to come forward, many sponsors came forward without us making any contact with them and we were able to assist some of the students in our constituency and community with devices. And we are very grateful to those persons who heeded the call and who made those devices available. And to some parents who received devices from different sources and donated those devices to the school principals or even to the MP's office to assist vulnerable persons who did not have access, we also should say a special thanks to them. You know when we meet citizens who show kindness, we must remember to say thanks to them.

So we know that there was a gap, and the Minister mentioned that the Government took steps to purchase devices and distribute. I think the number is 20,000 that the Minister mentioned.

4.00 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it did not stop there. The Ministry had printed packages supplied to students who either did not have access to a device, or who did not have connectivity in some of the rural districts. Some of our teachers really did beyond the call of duty, when they had the virtual classes and as well had to work with students who did not have connectivity and who did not have a device. I think that we really—yes, the situation is not perfect, but we really need to say and to commend our education professionals for the way that they adjusted to this situation.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Government as well procured MiFi devices and distributed them to students who had connectivity issues. The Minister did mention that the suppliers as well, corporate Trinidad and Tobago, agreed and did give some level of free data for those persons who benefited from those devices. So that

we know and we must acknowledge. The speaker before spoke about the teachers who may have had difficulties in adjusting to virtual learning, and we were told that the Ministry offered training to teachers and other education professionals who had to adjust to this new type of learning and the curriculum content, et cetera.

So that the work has been ongoing, moving towards a situation as we adjust to circumstances surrounding the pandemic to where the Ministry has been reintroducing face-to-face classroom engagement. In doing so, it is going to take some time to readjust and to get our students comfortable, to get parents to feel comfortable for their children to come out and interact, understanding the effects of the virus and the pandemic. But we have seen over time that more and more students are taking advantage of the fact that school has been reopening in a phased and structured and organized manner.

The Government over time, as I mentioned earlier, has consistently placed a lot of emphasis on education. As a matter of fact, education receives one of the highest allocations in the national budget on a consistent basis. Whilst the speaker before spoke about the school feeding programme, the speaker before that spoke about the GATE programme and the fact that there may have been cuts in these programmes over time, what has been happening, in a very organized manner, is that given the fact that we are working with very limited resources, the Ministry has been taking steps to make sure that these programmes reach the intended target group, which is the most vulnerable in our society.

You would know that the GATE programme, of course, which was introduced by a previous PNM Government, has over the time between 2016 and 2021 benefited over 150,000 students, with an expenditure, Mr. Deputy Speaker, of over 2.5 billion. That is something that we can boast about as a country, that is something that we should be proud about. But as times are no longer as they were

in the past, we have now found ourselves in a situation where we have to make sure that we get the best value for the dollar, and to make sure that these expenses reach the intended target group as I mentioned earlier.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, during the same period, approximately 1,700 scholarships were awarded at a cost of over \$800 million. Whilst there was some comment in relation to the reduction in the number of scholarships, we were advised that the number of bursaries have been increased significantly.

In terms of school feeding and school transport, approximately 600 million expended over the period 2016 to 2021, with a weekly supply of over 45,000 meals supplied weekly. Of course, this is something that as a small island State we stand out in terms of support for students who may not be in a situation, coming from a home that can provide for them their dietary requirements to allow and support their learning.

Infrastructure repairs to schools, over \$800 million spent and, of course, the Minister did indicate to us that in terms of infrastructure upgrade and remedial works, that those types of repairs and that type of spending continues on an annual basis.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Government will continue to assist those students through a means test arrangement who require devices to assist in their learning, but at the same time with the reintroduction of face-to-face learning, that requirement of course we know will not be as immediate as it was when no classes were able to be held as a result of the pandemic.

I want to spend a few minutes on the question of school violence. Over the last few weeks, we have noticed on social media videos circulating showing students engaged in violence, in particular in one school in south Trinidad, I think it is Siparia Secondary School. It is a great concern when we see our students

engaged in that type of activity, and it is even of more concern when we see adults getting involved in that type of behaviour and taking one side or the other, and encouraging that kind of violent behaviour.

It is not a situation that exists only at that particular school in south Trinidad. We know that we have an issue in relation to school violence, that none of us are proud about but that all of us should do what we can to make sure that incidents like these are in the very minority. So there will be some collaboration between the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service and the Ministry of National Security to discuss and arrive at solutions. Those discussions will take place this week, as we seek to put in place measures to curb the issues of school violence, and to make sure that we do not have incidents like that being repeated across Trinidad and Tobago.

As a parent myself, it is, of course, a great concern. I know that parents looking at those videos will be very concerned in terms of the safety for their children, and we will do all that we can to make sure that the school environment is as safe as possible for our children, as they engage in their pursuit of education.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I know that there might as well be some concern by parents who would be concerned about the health of their children, and I know that we will hear from the Minister of Health later on, but from my own observations as I pass through several of the school plans in my own constituency, looking at how they are adjusting to this face-to-face learning being reintroduced, I can safely report that all of the protocols associated with hand washing, mask wearing, sanitizers, cleaners, et cetera, have been put in place by the Ministry of Education, I am sure in conjunction and discussion with the Ministry of Health, and, therefore, they must be commended for that very responsible action.

We should take note as well that the Government has and did procure

vaccines for children 12 years and older—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Two more minutes, Member.

Hon. F. Cummings:—to allow our students the best protection from the illness associated with contracting the COVID-19 virus.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I think that our education system is in very good hands. I think the mover of the Motion understands the challenges and the funding issues associated with some of the things that all of us would like to see in place, but must be done on a phased basis as we prioritize the education of all our young people in Trinidad and Tobago. We as well will have a lot of collaboration between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service, as we seek to expand the range of technical/vocational learning available to all our young people, both those exiting the secondary school system and those who have a natural passion for technical/vocational.

Several plants will be established across Trinidad and Tobago to make that service available, and as well particularly in the rural districts, as we make agriculture, for instance, an option for those students who wish to pursue a career in agriculture, and those students who wish to pursue a career in technical/vocational areas.

With those few words, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for Chaguanas East—20 minutes.

Ms. Vandana Mohit (*Chaguanas East*): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to this debate. Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me begin by commending my colleague, Member for Tabaquite, for bringing forward this Motion which speaks to the pain and hardships existing in the society of Trinidad and Tobago. Let me also take this opportunity to endorse the contributions of my colleagues on this side here today.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I just want to take a few minutes to respond to some colleagues who would have spoken before from the other side. The last speaker, what I got from his contribution is that yes we are in a challenging time but, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we acknowledge that and that is why we are here today debating this very important Motion. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in listening to the Member, I expected to hear more about the Member in terms of his Ministry collaborating with the Ministry of Education in terms of dealing with situations arising out of the pandemic as it relates to the education sector, and not just hearing what we intend to discuss and what we intend to make an option for the young people of this country.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I listened to the Member as well for Tobago East, trying to paint a beautiful picture, but this Motion speaks for itself. Let us face the reality, instead of painting a beautiful picture of “shoulda, we could of, we would do”. What are we doing? How are we moving forward, in terms of the Member for Tobago East’s contribution?

Moving on, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Minister of Education, the Member for St. Ann’s East, would have started her contribution relating to inequities, and the provision of equitable services and education for students in Trinidad and Tobago. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to refer to my very own constituency, a situation that has been occurring, where the Jerningham Junction community centre is facilitating the Longdenville Presbyterian School—a school. The services of that Longdenville Presbyterian School being provided at the Jerningham Community Centre. That is not right, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And we speak about equitable services by the Ministry of Education? A few months of accommodation turned into three years and counting for that particular school.

The community centre is located in the village where I live and, of course,

when you have these types of activities where a school has to be housed in a community centre, it hampers the activities of the community centre, but luckily the village is so kind that it is three years and counting that this school is being facilitated at that community centre. So when we speak about equitable services and education, these are the kind of things happening in the education sector in this country.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I move on in terms of my contribution, this is a Motion which pains my heart, since Mr. Deputy Speaker, it clearly demonstrates what is the future of the socially disadvantaged in our society. Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know education has always been branded as a pillar of development, but when we look at what is happening currently under this administration, we can see the destruction of this valued pillar of development in our society.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, you would have heard it from the Leader of the Opposition this afternoon, that education has always been vaunted as the area from where the offsprings of the poor can source opportunities for upward mobility. When I speak about that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you would have heard it yourself from the Leader of the Opposition, where many speak in this country in terms of success, that education is the tool out of poverty, and it is viewed as an escape clause from poverty and, more so, generational poverty. What I am saying, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that many successful people can speak of education being an escape clause out of poverty in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, however, what I can say is that this Government has rammed a dagger through the hearts and opportunities of such persons wishing to aspire in terms of education. They have rammed a dagger through the hearts and opportunities of such aspirants, with their callous and uncaring policies as it relates and impacts on education, and especially the social sector programmes that assist

the less fortunate of society. Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you look at this, what will this do? This will surely perpetuate the generations of poverty, as there will be no avenues of escape for persons.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, if we are to assess the reality, the poor and vulnerable have not been at the forefront when it comes to policies by this Government. The poor and the vulnerable, they have been at the forefront of review, review, review, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In a time where hope should be given, the future of children is in danger, and I want to explain this a little bit.

I want to refer to an article where the Minister of Education—this article February 12, 2022:

“Gadsby-Dolly: Understand the consequences of missing classes

Parents who choose not to send their children out to physical school as rostered must understand the consequences of their actions...

‘It’s a decision a parent has to make.’”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, today I want to state that some parents understand the consequences, but they are simply limited or no avenues for the escape out of the poverty they are facing and the situations they are facing. As I move on, I want to deal with some of the realities.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, whilst there are educational opportunities for all, which will be the Government’s response, which Members on the other side have been stating, what are the realities? Mr. Deputy Speaker, how many children are selling produce by the traffic lights at the Churchill Roosevelt Highway? Mr. Deputy Speaker, how many children are wiping windshields at major intersections over this country? Mr. Deputy Speaker, how many children are trying to hustle something, when they should be at school whether online or physical? Mr. Deputy Speaker, when Government Ministers pass at these locations, what do they think?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, do they feel any empathy towards these children, do they even give them a sale?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the fact of the matter is that these children do not enjoy hustling on the streets; they do not enjoy this at all. Because if you communicate with them, you would hear woes of economic and financial hardships, some exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Government's inability to manage the economy to alleviate such unwanted suffering facing our citizens.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, let us be clear, the social inequalities—these types of social inequalities force children and parents to abandon pursuits of educational opportunities, and rather concentrate on immediate sourcing of a dollar to sustain themselves. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Government has created a population of desperate financially insecure persons. From what I am explaining, we have to ask again, does this Government care for the poor and vulnerable really obtaining an education?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I move on to another point of surveys. You know, surveys may sound unimportant, for some it may sound boring, but surveys help with generating policies to impact on realistic situations existing in society. Mr. Deputy Speaker, questions have been raised on this side whether any surveys or monitoring mechanisms have been implemented by the Government to track and monitor persons falling below the poverty line, and households affected by the COVID-19-related unemployment since such would definitely have an impact on the education system.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, to date, almost two years from the advent of the COVID-19 in Trinidad and Tobago, where on March 11th, somewhere around there, we had our first recorded case, and the first statement of the Prime Minister, somewhere around March 15, 2021, nothing has been done or published to guide

any thought process or viable solutions. So we have to ask, can this be the work of a responsible government? Because information generated from these types of surveys would allow the Government to definitely develop, review, implement and even guide sustainable policies to equalize the opportunities for the poor and the vulnerable, thus, educational opportunities would not have suffered.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, just to touch on the laptop initiatives. As mentioned by previous colleagues, you know, we have to say that this Government displays no foresight to prepare stakeholders, namely students, parents and teachers, for virtual learning, and one may argue that this was precipitated by the emergency measures related to COVID-19. That being so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the seeds of virtual learning were planted by a UNC administration, 1995 to 2000, and if one can remember the thrust towards computer devices where, for example, loans to public officers to procure computers those were available. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we can say that this was the start of leveling the playing field, and not allowing lower income owners to fall by the wayside because of the lack of opportunities arising.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, what these initiatives clearly highlight was the proactive thought processes by previous UNC administrations. Thus, building off these initiatives, the entire population and all stakeholders would have been on a stronger footing, to grapple with the vagaries of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on virtual learning.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the shift in education to access by virtual means definitely created social, economic and financial issues to ensure equality of opportunities. I want to refer to an article, January 26, 2022:

“Online a problem”

Hear it for yourself, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I quote:

“There are pupils who did not succeed at all. There are those who have

dropped out of the school system, you can't find them.”

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this shift in access definitely created financial and economic issues to ensure equality of opportunities.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to move to sanitizing and student plight. I have in my possession a letter dated Saturday 19 February, 2022, from a student in my constituency, wherein there is a further psychological fear by students on their personal safety as regard to sanitization and COVID-19 protocols. I quote, Mr. Deputy Speaker:

Many students, including myself, are confused and uncomfortable with the sudden circumstances.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I quote:

It is no secret that several schools currently have COVID outbreaks while teachers are in quarantine, yet these schools are still physically operational.

This is from a quote from a letter sent by a student in my constituency, and whilst I am in no position to ascertain the veracity of the processes, I trust that the Minister would engage in ensuring that adequate and acceptable measures are being instituted as regards to all schools.

4.30 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to touch a little bit on the school feeding and the loss of income. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, a clear manifestation of the disparity in access to education revolves around the following. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would have mentioned this time and time again, arising out of statistical data which was articulated time and time again, wherein a number of factors were analysed demonstrating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on income loss in households in a particular IDB report where 70.9 per cent of women were responsible for coordinating or assisting with home schooling and 28.4 per cent of

households indicated having enough savings to cover for an unexpected expense, for example, a laptop.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, what I would say in summary is that, those factors are still relevant and I suggest that the Ministry of Education work with the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services and research these findings, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Two minutes, Member.

Ms. V. Mohit: Yes. Thank you. Mr. Deputy Speaker, quickly to touch on the issue of the School Feeding Programme. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are asking, yes, it has been made mentioned of 45,000 and so on in the School Feeding Programme. But has the Government expanded or reviewed the programme? The reason that I am asking is because while some parents may have students who went out to school, some parents have students who both went out to school and are still engaging in online schooling, so this is a challenge for families, children coming from vulnerable families such as these. And the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries would have stated that the NAMDEVCO hampers would have been a permanent fixture and we have seen that this programme has ceased. So we are asking, what is happening with this programme?—because it helped. It helped vulnerable families who are struggling and now it would definitely help for those who are struggling and have to go—have children going out to school, as well as engaging in online schooling. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is quite clear that the Government, you know, has failed the socially displaced community of Trinidad and Tobago and this Motion is appropriate and definitely timely.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, quickly, I call on the Government to ensure that immediate and necessary measures be implemented to provide equitable access to all students of Trinidad and Tobago and do not allow our education sector to leave

anyone behind. I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for St. Joseph and you have 20 minutes.

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am here under the good graces of the people of St. Joseph and I thank them most sincerely for the continued honour to represent them in this Parliament. In speaking on behalf of St. Joseph on this matter of education, I recognize that St. Joseph probably has one of the highest school density per capita ratios in Trinidad and Tobago. We have about 18 schools in the constituency situated in areas from Bamboo to Aranguez to San Juan, Farm Road, Mt. D'or, St. Joseph proper which is the hub around First Capital Park and Mount Lambert. So this is indeed an honour and privilege to speak on their behalf.

I also recognize that in speaking to this particular issue, we cannot divorce it from the COVID epidemic. And various Ministries like education, like health, like finance, like social development would have to respond, will be the main Ministries in the front line, all under the tutelage and watchful gaze of our hon. Prime Minister Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley. And I wish him and the entourage safe journey back to Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the COVID pandemic did not hit only Trinidad and Tobago. And that is a fact that, I think, is sometimes lost on all of us as I speak to the national population and all right-thinking citizens through you and to them. The UNC will have you believe that COVID only hit Trinidad and Tobago. When COVID first hit the education system, we shut down schools for two weeks. That

was the initial reaction in 2020 at that time. Two weeks went to two months, two months went to two years and this is not only in Trinidad and Tobago. And any Minister of Education would have found themselves in a difficult position. And I want to congratulate most sincerely not only the Prime Minister and his team but also Minister Nyan Gadsby-Dolly in navigating the education portfolio in one of the most difficult times in the history of the world. And why do I say that, Mr. Deputy Speaker? And I think we have to have a dose of reality. A UNICEF report:

“COVID-19 ‘biggest global crisis for children in our 75-year history’ ...”

Those are the facts. That is what Minister Nyan Gadsby-Dolly had to deal with. And the report says:

“At its peak, more than 1.6 billion students were out of school due to nationwide shutdowns. Schools were closed worldwide for almost 80 per cent of the in-person instruction in the first year of the crisis.”

This is a global pandemic of biblical proportions once every 100 years that the Government had to face and Minister Nyan Gadsby-Dolly at the helm of this had to face and I congratulate her and I congratulate all our speakers who have spoken.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I just want to respond to a couple of claims put forward by the hon. Leader of the Opposition the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar. The Member said, yes, that when they left office GATE was at 60 per cent. But, you see, the fact is that while that is factually true, the Patrick Manning administration inherited a tertiary education participation rate of 11 per cent and with GATE we took it to 50 per cent and that is the sequence. If government is a continuum, at least recognize that you inherited 50 per cent and you took it to 60 per cent and I congratulate you. But we took it from 11 per cent to 50 per cent and those are the truths.

And when GATE was launched, an August 18th report on GATE in August

in 2017, quoted a then UNC Opposition Member saying that GATE was a barrier to excellence in education.

In other words, the UNC wanted to maintain the status quo in tertiary education for those who could afford it. That is what equity did, took it from 11 per cent to 50 per cent under the PNM. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the hon. Leader of the Opposition said that everything in a shambles. And I quote:

Health in shambles, education in shambles, national security in shambles. Let me put something on the record and I hope the following facts capture the public's imagination and attention but I doubt it because good news does not sell. Good news does not sell.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when the UNC left office, because we are talking about children and the Member said children should be our number one priority, the neonatal mortality rate, that is, the number of neonates dying in this country was about 13 to 15 per 1,000 live births, 13 to 15 under Kamla Persad-Bissessar. You know what it is today? Today it is six per 1,000. In other words, we have cut it by less than 50 per cent. That means that approximately 100 to 120 new borns stay alive now. Is that a health system in shambles, I ask? But good news in health has no currency in Trinidad and Tobago, absolutely none. That is what we did. So do not tell the population everything in shambles. We are in difficult times yes but we have met out Sustainable Development Goals of 2030, 18 years early on maternal mortality and neonatal mortality. That is not shambles. So I hope this little titbit captures the public's imagination.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, everybody on that side including the Leader of the Opposition spoke about the UNC's laptop programme and lauded it as this manna from heaven. Let me quote from a UWI report done by one Nerlene Callender-Sampson in 2015, an analysis of the UNC's laptop programme. Because, you see,

the speaker before, the hon. Vandana Mohit talked about how they were so prepared. Let me tell you what this report says and I quote:

“The findings revealed many barriers to implementation, including...the fact that the purpose for which the laptop was intended was unclear to students, and owning the device did not appear to make a significant difference in their attitude to learning;”

And:

“b) the lack of teacher efficacy and understanding about the educational purpose of using laptops as well as the use of technology in the teaching and learning process.”

This is not us. This is the University of the West Indies. It goes on:

“It is suggested that the implementation of the programme might have been more successful if pre-implementation activities had sought the buy-in of parents, teachers and...principal.”

This is the University of the West Indies and this is the nice part of the report. If you read the entire report it is an absolute critique and criticism of that UNC laptop initiative. This is not the PNM speaking. This is the University of the West Indies. Read that report.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are talking about keeping our children safe in schools and everyone has spoken about vaccines. But let me give you the facts about vaccines because, you see, it was the UNC that tried to sabotage this vaccination programme by talking about us being guinea pigs.

Mr. Lee: Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is an education Motion. This is not about vaccination by the Minister of Health. Please, help me out, 48(1).

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, overruled, Member, and I suggest you read the template of the Motion. Please, proceed.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Let me remind the Member about the Motion. So when you discourage parents from getting their children vaccinated, and one of your UNC Senators talked about vaccination and this is not a communist state, you are discouraging parents from getting their student children vaccinated.

However, since we started vaccinating the adolescent group 12 to 18, we have not had one case of MIS-C in that population going to school, not one. The global average according to UNICEF is 0.4. and I will end on that note very soon. The Caribbean averages, 0.6, 0.5, 0.4. We are 0.3, so we are keeping our children safe so that they could go back out to school.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to go back to the whole issue that the Minister of Education has faced. The COVID global pandemic affected school systems drastically. Another UNICEF report coming out of New York of 24 January, 2022, and this is where we have to be honest with ourselves as a society. COVID affected the globe. It says:

“More than 616 million students remain affected by full or partial school closures.

‘While the disruptions to learning must end...Schools must also go beyond places of learning to rebuild children’s mental and physical health, social development and nutrition.’”

And that is what we are trying to do, hon. Members. It is not easy and I am only grateful, only grateful that Minister Nyan Gadsby-Dolly is the Minister of Education in these trying times.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Because, you see, the UNC will have you believe it is only Trinidad and Tobago. It quotes in this same report:

“In the US, learning losses have been observed in many states including Texas, California, Colorado, Tennessee...”

—and it goes on. Are these states not more resourced than Trinidad and Tobago? Are they not?

And the last thing if you wanted evidence, Mr. Deputy Speaker, let us bring it home to the Caribbean. I have given you the global picture. Let us bring it home to the Caribbean and Trinidad and Tobago. Impact of COVID-19 on children and families in the eastern Caribbean area, and UNICEF Eastern Caribbean says:

“...which comprises of about 2.3 million people of which 26 per cent are children. It has severely impacted all areas of life...”—all areas of life.

“All countries have temporarily closed pre-primary, primary, secondary schools and universities and over half a million children are at home.”

So what has the Minister done? So we have identified the gaps. What has the Minister—this very good, most excellent Minister of Education, the hon. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly who I am proud to say is my friend and colleague. One, measures to fill gaps: TV programmes on Flow, Amplia, Digicel and Green Dot networks. Not only devices. Mass media, radio programmes, printed packages supplied to students. Measures to address lack of connectivity because Members opposite spoke of lack of connectivity. The Government procured 10,000—not, 1,000, not 5,000; 10,000 MiFi devices in July 2021 and distributed them to students and schools with connectivity challenges with three months’ free data included. That is what the Minister Nyan Gadsby-Dolly did.

Government also approached Internet service providers, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and they agreed to provide zero-rated access to student-learning management systems for three months and low-cost data packages. That is what we did. We engaged in teacher training in the creation of the open-educational

resources using curriculum content. Teacher training in different aspects on online delivery since March 2020. Next week will make two years since the teacher training in different aspects of online delivery started. That is what that Minister did.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the last few minutes I have I want to speak about GATE and equity and I quoted earlier where the UNC is quoted as saying that GATE was a barrier to access to education and they wanted the status quo pre-GATE to exist. And ask your questions why. Whereas this Government recognizing that GATE as it evolved also needed to evolve. Based on the GATE review committee of 2016 because you wanted data, you wanted proof, it found that students benefiting from GATE were mainly from those families with the means to support them without GATE. That is the status quo that the UNC wanted to maintain. We said no. Let us rejig GATE. Yes, money is an issue but with equity make sure GATE reached the people who did not have the wherewithal like others to support their children with tertiary education. So those were the adjustments. The adjustments were not made to deny the wealthy. But the adjustments were made to benefit those who are not as wealthy, not as well off. That is equity. And I congratulate the Minister who took that note through Cabinet.

And the introduction of the national bursaries from 2020 up to the 500 high performing CAPE students. It was based on what? Need. It was based on what? Alignment of study with developmental needs of the country. So match the country's needs with where we are going to spend resources and contribution to national community. What could be so wrong with that? What could be so objectionable to equity? What could be so objectionable to having the poorer families having the same access to GATE as the wealthier families who the report said were the ones most benefiting from GATE? What could be so objectionable to

that, colleagues? I put it to you, nothing.

And I put it to you as I come to an end, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the Minister of Education under the watchful gaze as I have been of the hon. Prime Minister through two years and two months of absolute global turmoil, has steered this country safely, has steered this country in the right path and I commend my colleague and friend Nyan Gadsby-Dolly for the excellent work she has done under trying, difficult circumstances. Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for St. Augustine; 20 minutes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. Khadijah Ameen (*St. Augustine*): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am pleased to join this debate as the Member for St. Augustine which neighbours the St. Joseph constituency represented by the former speaker the Member for St. Joseph just having completed his contribution. And in this Parliament, because of the COVID protocols, not everyone sits in the Chamber at the same time.

And I was listening online in the caucus room waiting to hear the Member for St. Joseph mention the St. Joseph Secondary School. St. Joseph Secondary School, formerly Curepe Junior Secondary, falls in the St. Joseph constituency. It is one of the schools that was constructed under the previous Government led by Kamla Persad-Bissessar that was abandoned by this PNM Government, that is overgrown in bush, that is overrun with snakes and one of the many, many facilities in this country that the PNM has allowed taxpayers' dollars to go to waste in this country, because in the St. Augustine constituency we also have the Curepe Presbyterian School that is in a similar state of disrepair. And I thought with all the concern the hon. Member for St. Joseph would have just kindly mentioned that the

St. Joseph Secondary School in that constituency is in need of being reopened, is in need of attention and it speaks to the level of representation St. Joseph has.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: This is a classic, Mr. Deputy Speaker, of the lack of awareness, the disconnect from reality that exists on the Government Bench.

I heard the Minister quoting a university report on the efficacy of the laptop programme. Unfortunately, the Member chose to cherry-pick the things he spoke about. Do you know that same report mentions that in 2014 the World Economic Forum put Trinidad and Tobago as one of the top three countries to be born a girl?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: And that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, was because of the advances in education and technology.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: The Member failed to mention that from the same report because it credits the work that the former government led by Kamla Persad-Bissessar did for education in this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member spoke about GATE and he asked, what is objectionable about the new requirements of this Government. Again, it speaks to a total disconnect from reality. If you sit as a representative for people in this country and you do not know what is objectionable about your new assessment system that disqualifies so many people with genuine need for tertiary education funding in this country, then you should resign and go home.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: There is a total disconnect from reality. And I can tell you that the present system, Mr. Deputy Speaker, makes the programme inaccessible for many,

many students. And I want to mention, you know, the history of GATE. GATE started as dollar for dollar under then Minister of Education Kamla Persad-Bissessar and Prime Minister Basdeo Panday. It was the first time in this country that tertiary education funding became a thing and many people were able to access tertiary education for the first time. That programme was expanded to GATE. And in that term under former Prime Minister Patrick Manning, the country saw that there were benefits but there were abuses. And so when Kamla Persad-Bissessar became Prime Minister in 2010 there were requirements, there was a review and there were strict requirements for the GATE programme.

So when the Minister talks about your assessment and the changes you made, the changes have to be realistic and it has to be something that would encourage positive use of the programme. So under the former Prime Minister, under Kamla Persad-Bissessar, what you had are requirements for students to have maintained a GPA that was a pass mark. You must pass your exams in order to get further funding. You must not be skipping topics. There were limits to prevent abuse of the programme. But it did not limit access so that students got access to tertiary education level.

You know what this Government also did? They stopped funding for masters programmes. They stopped funding for programmes for persons over a certain age. It seems that people who are—who when they have reached a certain age you want them to just be thrown into a dustbin and not contribute to society anymore. It seems that that is the objective of this Government. And maybe if the Members opposite assess the ages of the people who sit in Government and sit in Parliament and ask themselves if persons over 50 do not qualify to make a contribution to their country, then some of them would go home. It is very unfortunate that they take that approach because there are many people, Mr.

Deputy Speaker, who have so much to contribute to this country and who can—who have now reached a stage in their lives to do their masters. So these are some of the measures that this Government has brought in. So when you ask what is so objectionable, I could send you a list. “He gone outside?” He should. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, Member, you have been going fine. All right. I will give you that statement but, please, let us stay away from that aspect please. The “he” and the “he”—

Ms. K. Ameen: Thank you.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proper pronoun, proper representation.

5.00 p.m.

Ms. K. Ameen: Yes. Thank you. Thank you. Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is unfortunate that the Member for St. Joseph is not in the Chamber at this time and I hope wherever he is, he would hear a part of my contribution because it also impacts on the St. Joseph constituency which has not been adequately represented in his contribution today.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, under the former administration, I was chairman of Tunapuna/Piarco Corporation and there was the St. Augustine Education City Committee, and that encompassed an area that includes the St. Augustine, Tunapuna and St. Joseph constituencies. But the St. Augustine Education City is a geographic area that has over 70 education institutes; secondary, primary and tertiary education including UTT, University of the West Indies and many private tertiary education institutions. And with that concentration of education institutions there was a development drive to have that area become the education city of Trinidad and Tobago.

I interacted with that committee which was appointed by the Cabinet

because as chairman of Tunapuna/Piarco Corporation, there were many development elements of that committee that the regional corporation and local government played a role in. So, for example, solar lighting; security interconnecting the universities with the national police, traffic, pedestrian walks; and in fact entire roadways that would not have cars, park and ride facilities, other things whose objectives would be to reduce the traffic within that area. And people who know Tunapuna as a town centre know how busy that area is. The public health aspect of it, in terms of garbage collections, sanitation of the roadway, dealing with rat infestations and other sanitary elements also fell under the regional corporation. And so, as chairman of Tunapuna/Piarco Corporation, I would have initiated programmes to keep the town centres cleaner. And in keeping with the objectives of the St. Augustine Education City Committee, the PTSC would have initiated a special programme with stops within the St. Augustine—the education city area to facilitate the education institutions, to facilitate students, to make access to safe public transport easier and all of these were elements that were implemented by various agencies facing a common objective.

And, of course, a major part of that as well would have been the business incubation and the manufacturing industry on the East-West Corridor and, of course, that allows research to be rewarded by becoming innovation, and creating entrepreneurs, and creating more employment. And, you know, that initiative was just tossed aside by this Government when they came into office. And unfortunately, the good technical work that would have been done, the recommendations of that committee were just tossed aside. But the truth is that there is so much work that the People's Partnership Government would have done that is valuable and if this Government truly cared about education, there are many of those programmes that they would keep and they would continue. And it is not

just about pen and paper, this Government—Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Government is still in the age of chalk and slate, rather than moving to laptops and tablets for our children, rather than moving to Internet connectivity and technology for every single student in this country. This Government has completely failed and I hear them patting themselves on the back, and what I hear sadly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is a total disconnect from reality.

I want to take this opportunity to mention again—because I have spoken on previous occasions—the Curepe Presbyterian School. That school was constructed, a beautiful structure. It was perhaps 90 per cent completed and when this Government came into office, they completely abandoned the project. That building was overrun with bush, vine. It was fenced with a galvanized fenced. There were rats, snakes, roaches affecting even the surrounding community, the residents. The school lost their recreation area and so the children were very confined in the paved area waiting for this new structure to be put to use. And with this abandonment came vandalism. I visited the compound, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when I became MP and what I saw was huge electrical cables vandalized, ceiling, a lot of fixtures and so on, vandalized. And this would not have happened had this Government completed the school and opened it for the children to use. That is completely the fault of this Government. And at the stage it is now, it would cost a tremendous amount to bring back up to scratch based on the vandalism.

There are also issues because of the incomplete work with flooding in the surrounding areas, flooding of the existing classrooms because of the different levels. This is still a construction site. So, you know, we have been pleading with the Government to fix the schools, the numerous schools throughout this country, because every day that you do not open these schools, the cost of doing so increases. And I think the Government has been putting an unfair burden to the

taxpayers to pay for their incompetence and their lack of political will to come to open these schools. Some of them, unfortunately, are in constituencies represented by the Members opposite. In the surrounding areas to St. Augustine constituency, I want to mention the El Dorado Early Childhood Centre, I want to mention the St. Joseph Secondary School and, of course, I already mentioned the Curepe Presbyterian which sits in the St. Augustine constituency. And I mentioned the surrounding areas because it does not seem as though the Members on the opposite side who represent those areas intend to mention them. I do not know if they even know about them, if they intend to make any representation to their own Government to get these schools opened. So on behalf of those people as well who are not represented by the Government's voice today, I want to call on you to complete those schools and open them as we are preparing for COVID—the end of COVID and we are preparing for the physical return of schools. Many children are doing so in very cramped classrooms because of your neglect and your abuse.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you for this opportunity to make this brief intervention on behalf of my constituents and I know that my colleagues—I also want to take the opportunity to commend my colleague, Ms. Anita Haynes, for moving this Motion. Thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for Toco/Sangre Grande.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Roger Monroe (*Toco/Sangre Grande*): Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to join this debate where the Opposition calls on the Government to take immediate and necessary steps to provide equitable access to Education and the failure of the Ministry of Education to deliver on its essential services.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I listened to the speaker before me, the Member for St. Augustine, and I want to put on the record that that statement about the St. Joseph Secondary School and some other statements by that Member was misleading and I wish to share with this House the accurate information about that secondary school in St. Joseph and sort out those misleading statements. The statement by the Member for St. Augustine was misleading to the country and this honourable House about the St. Joseph Secondary School. It began sometime in 1972, and additionally in the '70s, '80s and '90s, tertiary education in this country was completely funded by the Government at all three campuses.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Monroe: All students had to pay, Mr. Deputy Speaker, at that point in time was their caution fee.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Monroe: Mr. Deputy Speaker, based on the Motion that is before us, I do not share similar views as the Opposition here today. Let me commend my colleague, the hon. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly, Minister of Education and the team at the Ministry of Education for skilfully handling the Ministry of Education affairs and the education system in this country during trying times of the global pandemic, COVID-19 pandemic.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Monroe: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister in her efforts to make good educational policies as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which none of us on both sides of this House had any clue or expectation of, held a national consultation which dealt with blended learning, physical and online; the role of the Teaching Service Commission; the role of parents and guardians in education and the curriculum reform.

Also, the Minister in her wisdom and under the guidance of our hon. Prime Minister, who is the head of the Cabinet, they would have held town meetings and this would have been broadcasted on national television so that all citizens and stakeholders would have been informed as to the direction by the Ministry of Education, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Suggestion boxes, I wonder if the Members opposite could have remembered that those boxes were placed in their offices; 41 constituencies in this country, Members of Parliament offices had suggestion boxes. Those boxes were there for citizens, stakeholders and everyone that involved and made education a part of their business, they were able and—equal and fair opportunity to give their views, ideas comments, et cetera, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the implementation of the hybrid schooling platform would have seen that the Ministry of Education planned and implemented systems to ensure that all of our students, not some, all of our students got the best quality of education available to them amidst the global pandemic. Teachers were trained and provided with the necessary tools to navigate effectively throughout the virtual schooling platform. Students were given a fair and equal opportunity to continue accessing an education from their schools and institution. The Ministry also provided additional learning platforms via the radio, television, newspaper, YouTube, *pennacool.com* and they also provided take-home packages to all students who were in need of such. As a result of all those just mentioned, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we saw the successful passing of the SEA exam, CAPE and CSEC in 2021, and I want to assure the nation that we will see the same in 2022.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Monroe: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Ministry of Education has been severely impacted by COVID-19, which has adversely disrupted the system of education,

not only in Trinidad and Tobago but across the world. Some 190 countries were affected by such and some 1.6 learners were affected worldwide, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister and her team at the Ministry of Education in their wisdom, not wanting any students to be left behind, would have implement the Adopt-a-School programme along with the Ministry's distribution of devices and MiFi devices to students, so that those who did not have devices would have been able to join online school and was given a fair and equitable and equal opportunity to do so. We would have seen out of that programme, joint with the warm and giving persons in our public spaces and the Ministry's efforts, that the Ministry would have secured some 22,000 devices; laptops were 17,233 given to students; tablets, 10,000; 22,000 came from donations; and 10,000 MiFi devices, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister did all in her power to ensure that school buildings were upgraded and deemed fit in a timely manner to facilitate both students and teachers in a safe and comfortable learning environment. Those upgrades were widespread throughout this country. Those upgrades consist of, to name a few: installation of additional sinks and taps; repairs to lighting fixtures; upgrade to the water system and additional installation of water tanks to ensure that there were no shortages of water when students were on the school compound to keep their selves clean and sanitized; designated sickbays were also installed where needed to ensure that students who exhibited flu-like symptoms were removed from the classroom and they were examined in a separate space; provision of hourly sanitization and cleaning to ensure students and teachers remained safe along with the existing system of cleaning that the schools would have in place.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am sure that many parents and students throughout

this country are willing to testify of the excellent work of the Minister of Education and the Ministry of Education. As I speak now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have not seen any media or social media posts of Members opposite visiting any schools in their constituency, either it be to see the conditions of the schools or classrooms provided for students to study, to give words of encouragement and motivations to students in these trying times or to see if they can assist in any way possible students in their constituency to make sure that they get the best educational opportunity available.

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Madam Speaker, I, as the Member of Parliament for Toco/Sangre Grande, visited schools within my constituencies, schools such as: the Sangre Grande Hindu School, Cunapo St. Francis RC School, the Matura Government Primary School, Toco Anglican School, Toco Secondary School. And at those visits I was informed by the principals and those in authority that the attendance range for— daily attendance range for students ranged between 80 to 90 per cent, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the hon. Prime Minister, the Minister of Education, the Minister in the Ministry of Education, the Members for Lopinot/Bon Air West, Point Fortin and other Members on the Government Bench would have visited schools in their constituencies to see that the welfare and well-being of their students in their constituency is being taken care of, Madam Speaker.

At this point, Madam Speaker, I wish to encourage all parents and guardians within Trinidad and Tobago, please do not be misled by the Opposition and do your very best; very best to embrace the opportunities amidst all this country is facing right now to ensure that your child, relatives and family members get the best education available to them.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Monroe: You see, Madam Speaker, my plea comes against the backdrop to the parents and guardians but I am very sure that all Members opposite who have children and family members or relatives that are permitted the attend school, whether it be virtually or physically, at this moment will ensure that their family members attend school. And those who are not permitted, that is the kindergarten to Standard 4, those Members, those hon. Members will make it their business that when they are permitted to do so, they will ensure that those members that they are concerned about or are close to their heart attend school. So to the citizens of this country and to my constituents, I tell you, embrace the opportunities provided to you right now and make it your ever best effort to attend and send your children to school.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Monroe: Madam Speaker, with all that I have just shared with this honourable House and the national public of Trinidad and Tobago, let it be known that the constituency of Toco/Sangre Grande and myself do applaud the performances of the Government and the Minister of Education and the Ministry of Education, and I want to extend a heartfelt thank you for all that we have benefited and will continue to benefit with respect to education in this country. To the education providers at the Ministry of Education and Minister Gadsby-Dolly, I ask you to continue to stand in your truth. As the Minister of Education and a Member of the Cabinet and the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, remember, Minister Gadsby-Dolly, that the Lord said through psalmist David that they opposite shall not touch his prophet or do them no harm.

Madam Speaker, as my contribution comes to an end in this debate, let it be known that the Ministry of Education, the Minister of Education, the Prime Minister, his Cabinet and this Government will do their ever best to ensure that all

citizens in this country, when it comes to education, get the best service and equal opportunity available to them, and I stand committed to continue to support my colleague and the Ministry of Education, and I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Rai Ragbir (*Cumuto/Manzanilla*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I want to tell my learned friend and colleague, MP for Toco/Sangre Grande, that Members on this side do visit schools.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: I want to tell the hon. Minister of Health that the decrease in neonatal mortality rate, which the Member for St. Joseph boasted about, was possible, was work done by the committee chairman in 2011, by Dr. Lackram Bodoie, now MP for Fyzabad. And the vision was then by the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, 2011, and now the country is reaping the benefits of such a vision.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: Madam Speaker, I am honoured to stand here in this august Chamber to speak on this very important Motion. And it is very important to me being in Cumuto/Manzanilla because I have seen where the constituents have fallen short in receiving their equal and equitable opportunities for education. I myself have been a physician for over 20 years and I have started from humble beginnings. And yes, education meant everything to me and I escaped the loophole of poverty, like many people on both sides.

Madam Speaker, I am reminded by the words of the great calypsonian Slinger Francisco, known as the Mighty Sparrow, the calypso king of the world, in one of his songs, "Education a Must". I cannot sing but I would like to say a few of

the words:

“Education, education, this is a foundation
Our rising population needs some education
To be recognized anywhere you go...
Without an education in your head
Your whole life will be pure misery, you’re better off dead...
Don’t allow idle companions to lead you astray
To earn tomorrow you...”—have—“to learn today.”

Madam Speaker, I want to first of all endorse my hon. Member for Tabaquite on the full Motion that has been presented and also to endorse the Opposition Leader’s comments as well. What is important here is to understand that children need to learn, children need to go to school. But there have been many issues and I have seen it in Cumuto/Manzanilla.

And, Madam Speaker, I want to remind this House that in my first budgeting response I spoke about being visited in my office from constituents from Sangre Chiquito Presbyterian School that they have no school for the last three years. In fact, in 2021, in June to be exact, that school would have celebrated 130 years of existence. The school now is divided, two sets of students, and the total student population is 61 and if that school was in a state of readiness and completed, they would have had 225 students. I am sure there are about eight teachers, one principal. Now, the problem with that school is it is shared now between the Presbyterian board and the Ministry of Education. But right now, that entire school has to be revamped. It has to be demolished because you are talking about 130 years of existence. So I am pleading with the Government, I am pleading with the Minister of Education, let the people there of that constituency which has grown tremendously, Sangre Chiquito, get an opportunity for a new school. Many of the

children come from very poor agricultural families so we need to hear their plight.

Again, what I would like to say in terms of connectivity, Cumuto/Manzanilla is a very rural community, lots of landslips, lots of rolling hills, so Internet is difficult to access. You have a lot of people who cannot afford laptop and devices. And I dare say, many people have not received such devices, like many areas in the country, although we can boast about receiving devices both private and public. But my constituents have suffered tremendously and because of that, I know a lot of my children in that constituency have fallen behind. Right in Coalmine, Sangre Grande, we have an ECCE centre, Early Childhood Care Centre, and that has been completed since 2015 but it is yet to be opened. Again, it is another poor community and the people have to find a way so that their little children can actually access education.

I want to also mention the part about school transport. Many of the persons cannot afford transportation to take their children to school so they depend on the yellow buses and, you know, there have been issues of transportation fees, et cetera. So many parents and guardians have kept their children at home. So I want to plead to the Government, look at the community, the rural community, there has been a definite neglect from the Internet, the connectivity, the devices and, as I said, the school. I do not want to be long and I do not want to be repetitive, but I would like a fair share for the constituents of Cumuto/Manzanilla.

I want to close by asking that many of the Imams in the community have asked me if there was a possibility of a Muslim school to be constructed at that corner, peninsula of Trinidad, be it Toco/Sangre Grande or Cumuto/Manzanilla. So I am putting it on the *Hansard* that I am requesting and asking kindly that we could have an Islamic school for our citizens. And with those few words, Madam Speaker, I thank you. God bless.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Laventille East/Morvant.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister in the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Adrian Leonce): I thank you very much for allowing me to contribute to this Motion. First of all I will like to say, we need to congratulate—just like we congratulate doctors and the nurses, we need to congratulate our teachers. We have to congratulate our teachers. This has been a difficult time and our teachers stood their ground, and they are committed to the children of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Leonce: We also have to acknowledge that we have some problems. Yes, not all students have devices. Some have to share with their parents, some with their siblings, some have no Wi-Fi, some have Internet issues, connectivity issues and the Ministry took a position to find ways to solve these issues or to mitigate against some of these issues. Hard copy packages are prepared on a weekly basis for students to collect, to complete at home and to drop back for collection, so that the teachers are able to correct their work.

We have to also recognize that in this pandemic so many things have changed, caused us to change, and the Ministry of Education has been doing an excellent job in shifting so that we can give the best service to the students of Trinidad and Tobago. There are different types of teaching that has been created, desynchronous, where a teacher teaches online, a live class, at a specific time. Then there is the asynchronous where lessons are prepared and it is the option of the student to be able to do their work at their own time. That is to cater for persons who may have issues with having a device at the point in time and they can always do their work afterwards.

So students with connectivity and device limitations have been allowed to come to school also, on the school compound, to access Internet, to access the school devices and hence attend classes during the school day. Teachers with limitations are also allowed to come on the school compound and teach, and they were also given school laptops, tablets as well as Mi-Fi devices.

We also spoke about having safe learning spaces. Now, it is difficult for the administration and the ancillary staff to always be following up and making sure the spaces are clean. So some level of responsibility is left upon the students, the parents, the teachers, to ensure a safe working and learning environment.

5.30 p.m.

We have to not leave the responsibility on others but we have to also be responsible for ourselves, which is why we created a culture of wearing your mask, watching your distance and washing your hands. These are things that we are responsible for ourselves to keep a safe space, to keep us safe and to keep us healthy. We sanitize, we maintain a clean space. Schools have been outfitted with several sinks, standing temperature machines, hand sanitizer dispensers, signs all over reminding us of our safety protocols. Contact forms have been put at the entry of the school to keep a record, to keep a data, as well as pre-screening forms that are filled out daily. Classrooms with partitions have been opened and classrooms are now twice the size, so that social distancing can occur. Schools are on rotation, thus the fraction of the school population is present on one physical day. So it allows safe space. Not all schools are very large so based on the layout of the school will determine how many students can comfortably occupy the space for learning in a safe way. And there is rotation to ensure that every one can come.

We have also encouraged that the children are vaccinated to reduce their risk and the impact if they contract the COVID-19 virus. Teachers, we spoke about

their ability to do online instructions. The Ministry has gone over and beyond from the beginning of this COVID pandemic. Since September 2020, the Ministry of Education put things in place to prepare teachers for this shift in platform, from physical to online and blended learning. At the beginning of each term, for two weeks, set aside specifically for planning the way forward and training. Whole day training sessions occur for staff to learn the basic set up for classrooms and taking online rolls and all that is required for them to effectively and efficiently put forward their learning curriculum to the child.

As early as July 2020 free distance courses were available for all staff, the teachers to start learning to teach online before the school term actually started. All the courses provided were free, some courses ran during the day, some courses ran after hours. So it allowed a flexibility for persons to be able to learn at their convenience. In my view, once a teacher wanted to learn, the option was there and it was available. A management system was also created by the Ministry of Education where all the data for the students and teaching material could be accessed from one platform. The Notemaster Programme was created where lessons in every subject area at every form level was posted with ready to teach lessons, videos and assignments.

Just think about it, a teacher can just come access it, click and teach. It is a combination of all different teachers coming together, putting forward their lessons. So it is actually an opportunity for a teacher to improve in the product that they give to a child. I think that the Minister and the Ministry of Education should be applauded for this initiative.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Leonce: Also, in order to determine if there are any gaps there are diagnostic tests that are done every term and these gaps are addressed. Added to

this, supervision by curriculum officers has also increased tremendously, meetings occur weekly and clinical supervision is very frequent. This did not happen before. So where we see there are some deficiencies because of the COVID pandemic, there are also some improvements in systems, improvements in technology, implementations and I dare say this would allow us to have a better and stronger and more robust way in terms of how we deliver the curriculum to the child.

A lot of information is disseminated continuously through online chats and groups. A lot of the teachers they learn, they share and I believe that the Ministry of Education, the teachers of Trinidad and Tobago and we the representatives have a part to play in making Trinidad and Tobago's education system much better, much greater.

I thank the Member for Tabaquite for bringing this Motion so that we can ventilate some of these issues and we can also share some of the wins, and again, I want to congratulate my Minister of Education, Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly for her great work, her leadership and thank you very much for the short contribution.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Fyzabad.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Lackram Bodoë (Fyzabad): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute on this very important and critical Motion and I want to congratulate my colleague, the MP for Tabaquite for raising this Motion. I also want to congratulate my colleagues who have spoken before and I support their views, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, this is a very broad Motion, well-constructed by my colleague to allow a fulsome ventilation of the many issues that can impact on the opportunities for all citizens to access quality education as stated in paragraph one of the Motion.

Madam Speaker, COVID-19 has exposed new cracks in our education system, such as the challenges presented by virtual learning to students, teachers and parents and many of those have been mentioned already. Madam Speaker, I just want to use the opportunity to treat with the issue of school violence, and this matter has been raised by the MP for La Horquetta/Talparo, mentioned already in the debate.

So, Madam Speaker, this is a longstanding issue and it did not take long to rear its ugly head when the schools reopened fully last week. And this is the issue, of course, of violence in schools. Madam Speaker, it is an old problem. Many of us have benefited; we understand the value of education. I myself started my career as a secondary school teacher. I taught for one year at the Fyzabad Senior Comprehensive School way back in 1978/'79, and that was a very interesting experience. I was a 20-year-old teacher in that school and even at that stage, Madam Speaker, so many years ago there was already the issue of violence in schools. I can tell you first hand, I witnessed students walking around in those days with a pen knife. It was not a switch blade, but they had the pen knife in their pocket and they would expose it to you, the teachers and, of course, there was also the issue of harassment of teachers, female teachers, of course, but myself as a young 20-year-old, Madam Speaker, would have been harassed as well. So this would have been the culture that has been in these schools and of course here we are, 2021, so many years later speaking about this. But I just wanted to mention that that this has been with us.

In fact, you know, Madam Speaker, I often reflect to say that teaching is so challenging that it drove me to become a medical doctor. You know, Madam Speaker, it is perhaps an easier vocation to practise medicine than to be a teacher. Because it is such a tremendous responsibility to look after and to care and to

ensure that the young ones who come under your care as a teacher, you know, can do the job. It is a tremendous responsibility. So I have great respect for teachers and of course it is also very important that our teachers are given the support and the resources that they require.

So, Madam Speaker, the issue of violence in schools is close because that school, Siparia West Secondary that was mentioned, is in my constituency and for the last six and a half years, you know, amongst the other secondary schools I have kept an eye on that school because it is in an area, a community that, you know, is a bit what we might called “deprived” and the students who go to that school do not always come from good, you know, homes or homes that have plenty and so on. So we need to analyze in more detail as to why these issues are taking place.

If you permit me, Madam Speaker, to—and we are talking about equity in education and this is very important, because if you are in a situation, if you are in an environment where you feel threatened then you are losing your opportunity, you are not having equitable or equal access. So if I can quote from the newspaper article, I believe that the week, began this week Monday:

“Govt moves to curb violence at Siparia West Secondary”

And the first line is:

“Parents of students at the Siparia West Secondary School are threatening to keep their children at home as violence continues at the institution.”

So this is worrisome. But I want to go on, Madam Speaker, and quote from one of the parents and I think this needs to be read into the record:

“On the first day of his rotation, five boys approached my son and told him he had to pay them in order to be in the school. He had 25 dollars which I gave him that morning, he spent \$4 and they took the other \$21,”—a parent told *Guardian Media* under the condition of anonymity.

“That parent said their son was excited to start the school term...” And we know of this, Madam Speaker, because the COVID pandemic and we appreciate and understand that the pandemic has given us challenges and so on, especially in education. So this is a child now that would have been expecting and happy, eager to start school and this is the first day experience. So the parent is saying that:

“...their son was excited to start the school term, as he had not set foot in school since he passed the SEA exam.”

So can you imagine:

“He is fearful now, he has asked if he could stay home but the ministry has stopped that. He has only gone to school physically for one day because he didn’t want to go back to” —school to— “be bullied for his money. I don’t want to force him to go but what else can I do?” the parent...said.”

And I think, Madam Speaker, this really hits the nail on the head. It is really the crux of the matter and my friend, my colleague for La Horquetta/Talparo who is also the Minister of Youth Development and National Service, who made a contribution alluded to consultations between his Ministry and the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of National Security. I think that is commendable but I also expected them—we would have gotten more solutions in terms of what can be done to assist the youths and to treat with this issue.

So, Madam Speaker, as I said I am very intimately familiar with what happens in the school. But let us look at some of the issues, and this is the reality of that school. Some of the underlying issues relate to infrastructure and equipment, for example, replacing broken metal louvers, replacing metal doors, replacing damaged furniture and of course all these little things that can be done. I know we have challenges with resources but they are important to create the right environment for these children. But more so there is also the issue of security. The

teachers have been asking about increased security. Even the talk of metal detectors and the issue of guidance counsellors, there seems to be a shortage of guidance counsellors, and of course police patrols and so on.

Madam Speaker, all these are very important measures but one thing that struck me is that this school, and I often wonder where we are and if we are getting this right, because this school, the majority of students are students who have made under 30; 95 per cent have made under 30 per cent in the SEA exam. So one has to wonder if our system has it right where you have an entire school with this population. Now, if that is the case it means that schools like this, and I just choose Siparia West Secondary as an example, I am sure there are many others in the country and so on, if this is the school population then we need to ensure that those, the teachers and so on, who are teaching there are trained, because it requires a lot of remedial learning. So I am just throwing that out because maybe it is something we need to think about. That is a big debate in our school system who goes where and what resources are provided. But I just want to throw that out, Madam Speaker.

So, there is also the issue of the curriculum issues, Madam Speaker. As I said the majority of the students, less than 30, so they require additional attention. And you also have an issue where many students are entering schools because they take two and three attempts to pass SEA. So you have 14-, 15-, 16-year-olds and what has been found is that this causes a level of frustration and it has been found especially in these particular schools that these are the students that would end up sometimes practising school violence and bullying and so on. So that is something that we can look at.

In fact, in my conversation with the principals of all of the schools within the constituency, the secondary schools especially, they came up with about six points

which I think is worthy of mention, Madam Speaker, in terms of the issues that might be relating to school violence and these are some things that perhaps the Minister of Education can address. And these six factors were all common, was that these students did not perform well in the SEA, you have affiliation to gangs around the community. In fact, it is said that some of these incidents in the school is a spillover of the community—gang activity in the community. And the third factor was that they came from depressed and unfortunate backgrounds. Some of them grew up in violent homes. So that is an issue. Also there is the issue of parents who play no part in their child’s educational and emotional development and this became a challenge during the COVID pandemic, Madam Speaker. And of course we had the issue of parenting and so on.

So, Madam Speaker, I just want to close with one issue which came about in discussion with principals and so on, in addressing this issue of school violence. You know it is a pervasive issue, there are many points involved and it is not an easy problem to solve, it will require a multi-disciplinary approach, and a whole of society approach. But I think it is something that we need to address. And I thought this was interesting because when I spoke to one of the principals the issue of suspension came up. In fact, in this school it was reported that six students have been suspended for the week, Madam Speaker.

What is suspension? What does that mean? You know, Madam Speaker, when these six students are suspended the current regulations mean that if the incident happen today, violence in schools today they are suspended by the principal. The first thing, the first shortcoming is that those students are not really suspended until the parents come in to the school. So they are given a note but their parent has to come into the school and sign to accept the suspension.

So, Madam Speaker, in some cases the parent might come the next day, but I

was shocked to learn that in some instances the parent might take a week to come. What it means is that the students who has offended is free to come back to school the next day, and the day after, and the day after that without any sanctions. The principal has no power, no authority to impose any sanctions. So it almost seems like a nonsensical approach. But again, I throw this out because this is the reality of the situation in schools and this is what happens. So when we hear of a suspension we are thinking that maybe, you know, it was a punitive measure, but really and truly it is not. So what can we do about this? In fact—so, assuming that the suspension is carried out and the student is home for six days, Madam Speaker, then what happens? There is no requirement for any corrective measures during this time. In many instances the student is unsupervised, there is a greater opportunity for mischief and involvement in other activities and very interesting, you know, when the student comes back they are recognized by their peers. In fact, the principal mentioned that this is almost, they get a stripe on their shoulder, you know I was suspended, this is a big thing, you know, I reach now, Madam Speaker. So that is something we need to look at in the culture.

I just want to close with one suggestion, Madam Speaker, and I think this has been raised before in the numerous discussions over the years about the education sector and how do we treat with it and what can we do and this was the issue of suspension centres. And I want to invite my colleague, the Member for St. Ann's East, the Minister of Education, who is very familiar with my constituency, Madam Speaker. She has been there to open a school and so on, but I want us to look at the idea of suspension centres, it is just my term. I mean there might be a more fancy term for it, but what is a suspension centre? What does it do? It means that when these students are suspended and they are home why we do not look at getting them to come to a centre. So they have to report, first of all, they have to be

under supervision so we will ensure that during the six days or the seven days that they are suspended that something comes out of it. So they must be supervised and I am asking—Siparia for example is very well suited. We have what is called the “Sporting Complex” and we have a community centre. This is just a model that can be—I am sure there are other constituencies where this model can be implemented. So you have them report to a centre. The sporting complex is right next door. The young boys sometimes can burn off the energy. You have a sporting activity, you have whatever and so on, but in addition to that you can have counselling by maybe the community police, to guidance counsellors, the psychologists and so on.

The point being is that you must involve them, have them participate in some meaningful activity that will cause some sort of behaviour change. In other words, Madam Speaker, you must make it a strenuous week. It must not be a free week. It must not be a week of holiday. It must be a week, Madam Speaker, that makes the student think twice to offend again and maybe not want to be suspended.

So, Madam Speaker, with those few words I want to say that I want to commend my colleague, the MP for Tabaquite for bringing a very, very important Motion. I want to support this Motion. I think it is timely, it is critical. I think it calls upon the Government to rethink, to look at many issues in the areas of, especially the issue of equity, the provision of education and it gives us the opportunity to think outside of the box and to look at how we treat with the education of our children as we go forward, Madam Speaker. With those few words, Madam Speaker, I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk banging*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Point Fortin.

Hon. Members: [*Desk banging*]

Mr. Kennedy Richards (*Point Fortin*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I

listened attentively to every speaker today, Madam Speaker. One of the things that caught my attention is that the love for education is there on both sides of the fence. One of the comments made by the hon. Member for Chaguanas East when she said, the futures of the children are in danger, I want to categorically deny that. Because the PNM Government has a responsible way in which they deal with education. And I jot down a few comments, a few programmes that was started from the PNM Governments, all the way back from Dr. Eric Williams.

So, Dr. Eric Williams, he started the biscuit and milk programme. I tried to get the correct name but grandma said it was the biscuit and milk programme, so I would keep the biscuit and milk programme. And that was there to assist the most vulnerable in society. Sometimes that was the only meal that they would have gotten for the entire day. Skip forward now to Prime Minister Manning. I was in school when he started the breakfast programme. In 2004/2005, somewhere about there, when they changed over from A levels to CAPE, he provided us with a book grant. I was a recipient of that. That would have assisted us in taking care of the cost of those books because we could of no longer pass down, collect books from our elders and carry on, so we got the book grant. The Dollar-for-Dollar Programme was turned into GATE, school transport was moved from couple of bus tickets in your pocket to an actual maxi-taxi via the PTSC picking you up at your doorstep, carrying you to school and dropping you back at your doorstep. Those are some of things that he would have done.

Dr. Keith Rowley, the hon. Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, he enhanced most of those PNM policies. He even added, Madam Speaker, which is no insignificant thing, the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service. That is part of education as well. And what that will do is it will assist those who are not going into, who want to chart a different course in their life, a different

course to be successful, whether it is trade, technology, agriculture, he has put that in place so that all and sundry could have something to do, to be successful; all young people have something to do to be successful. And also, which is most important, most significant, Madam Speaker, he placed the nation's children in the capable hands of two mothers who have cared deeply for the nation's youths. And today I say—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: And today I say, Madam Speaker, that when you are in the hands of a mother you can never be in danger.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: Madam Speaker, thanks again for this opportunity and as I dive into this Motion by the Member for Tabaquite which calls on the Government to take immediate and necessary steps to provide equitable access to all students I would attempt to show how that is already being done. I think that was done by every other Member so I will speed through the contribution.

One of the things we must do is when we come to Parliament to bring Motions it must be supported by authentic and reliable sources, because Parliament is really not the place for wasting time and for old talk, Madam Speaker. I mean this august House, this is a reputable environment and we must keep it as such. The education sector has proven to be resilient and stronger now more than ever under the stewardship of the hon. Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly and Minister Morris-Julian working in tandem.

The Minister of Education in her contribution earlier she clearly laid out the facts and information, figures to school the Member for Tabaquite. And what my colleague said, and I will give a few examples with regard to training, procurement of devices, leaflets that were handed out, it signified that no youth was left behind

in this tumultuous time that we had with respect to COVID. And when we dissect this Motion we see a little bit of exaggeration, maybe not misinformation, but a little bit of need for attention seeking, Madam Speaker. And when you look at what, at the part that says, the Government has failed to provide a safe learning space from a sudden decision to institute, in-person classes for students, that to me is very vague and is meant to create some type of confusion.

I would like to ask the hon. Member for Tabaquite, Madam Speaker, how can this decision to return to gradual in-person modality at school be sudden when the Government has been preparing for this return since early 2021? How can this be sudden when the Ministry has been providing regular updates and announcement and mapping out the return to the school? It cannot. Our children need to go back out to school, Madam Speaker. That fosters holistic development and learning. COVID-19 as we all know has disrupted how we learn and how education takes place globally. It is not just Trinidad and Tobago alone. And our Minister of Education was given the charge to ensure that our educational system is navigated and I think that she is achieving that said objective.

When our secondary schools were reopened on a rotational basis earlier this month, I took the time to visit my alma mater, Vessigny Government Secondary. And during my visit I saw the teachers touring with the students around the compound and that tour indicated to the students who were Form 1s and Form 2s, who were just getting the opportunity to see what the inside of their school look liked after almost two years. It gave them the necessary information as to how to behave and how to interact with their colleagues, and they need that interaction because that is a major part of learning. And this is why the Ministry worked to ensure that they could have made what we are doing today a lot easier, where our secondary school children are back out and our Ministry of Education continues to

work forward for our children to return at the primary level.

Madam Speaker, the Opposition would have thought that when the Ministry started the phased return of in person classes, there might have been issues in execution, however to this day, there is no major issue, no major issue reported when the Ministry started this phased reopening.

6.00 p.m.

The Opposition expected the Ministers and staff at the Ministry to possibly fail in this endeavour, but that did not happen, Madam Speaker. Because you see, Madam Speaker, vision always precedes strategy. The vision was laid out and the strategy is being executed well by the Minister of Education and her team. And the fact is, Madam Speaker, that the Ministers and the staff at the Ministry of Education have been successful in providing learning spaces for our students especially those who are back out in the face-to-face modality. And this was happening as far back as SEA in 2020 when the Government had to provide a safe space for students to write the examination within the new context of COVID-19, and that was also a success.

Misinformation from the Members opposite will continue to run endemic in this Motion, and it tells us that the Government has failed to manage resources to facilitate adequate funding for GATE, scholarships, School Feeding Programme, access to special education. Madam Speaker, I know the Minister already stated all the facts to discredit that, so I would not go further into that. But as the Member of Parliament for Point Fortin, as well as a former Vessigny Secondary Government student, when I visited all the schools within my constituency last year as well as this year—I took an opportunity to visit my old school at every occasion—and I saw breakfast and lunches being delivered via School Feeding Programme. So, it could not be a fact that they were not taking care of the most vulnerable in society,

Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, the GATE programme and Government scholarships, I would have appreciated if they would have given and presented some evidence to show that Government was not fulfilling its commitments to the tertiary level students who are under the GATE and national scholarship and bursaries, and we know that is not true. So the Government is doing what needs to be done to maintain those programmes at the university levels.

Madam Speaker, the education sector in Trinidad and Tobago is performing well and doing well. It is operating smoothly—right?—and to the standard that is expected without deviation and disruption taking into consideration COVID-19 and its effect on technology, and all the other aspects that were well ventilated here today. I would like to commend our teachers, principals, service providers, and all the staff at the Ministry of Education for ensuring that our school sector is managed diligently. Madam Speaker, this is so because of the leadership by the Minister, Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly, as well as Minister Morris-Julian, and to those extraordinary women, I say, “Well done. Well done.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: Madam Speaker, the Member for Tabaquite talks about providing access to education, but our Ministers have been improving the accessibility for education for our students from in exception. In the south-west belt alone, Point Fortin to be exact, we have many schools that have been built, and some are being reconstructed, some are being repaired: Chatham Government Primary School which has been built and opened in late 2021; the Southern Central Anglian in Coromandel is under reconstruction after decades; the St. Peter’s Primary School in Bonus is very close to a full completion; the Fanny Village Primary School will finally open its doors to its students this year; the Point Fortin

East Secondary School will continue to undergo much needed repairs and under my representation and assistance from the Minister of Education. Progress in our educational infrastructure in the length and breadth of the constituency and extended to the nation, Madam Speaker.

It is with this in mind, I can say without a shadow of a doubt, that the people of Point Fortin will reject the Motion, Madam Speaker, and I take the opportunity to speak about two experiences that I have had in a major institution. I was once in a class, Madam Speaker, and I had two brothers of Afro-descent sitting next to me, and we had three brothers on the other side of Indo-descent right across from us, and in that setting, Madam Speaker—and it upsets me till today, but in that setting I remember a lecturer came in and he turned his back to me and my two Afro brothers—turned his back—and he was teaching that way. But here I stand, Madam Speaker, and while I could have stood up for myself, there are people in this country who cannot stand up, and today they have two mothers, the hon. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly and the hon.—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards:—Lisa Morris-Julian—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards:—who would stand up to make sure that they receive equitable education in this country, Madam Speaker.

And the other experience, Madam Speaker, that we had is that this extremely intelligent young man from Point Fortin, a few years younger than me, he got four ones CAPE first year, second year he got four ones, he applied to the university to do medicine, they blanked him, told him, “You could do mechanical engineering.” And after two weeks, Madam Speaker, when he questioned why it is that some of his peers who did not have the same grades as him were accepted, it was only then

and then he was accepted to do medicine. And I must say today, Madam Speaker, there are many stories like that, and there are many stories of inequality in society. But while they say that is inequality, I say this is iniquity and we must work together to ensure that each and every creed and race in this country has an equal space and an equal access to education, and I dare say under this Minister of Education that is happening at the time, Madam Speaker.

You know, not to belabour a point, Madam Speaker, and in closing I want to say, Madam Speaker, that education is extremely important and I think both sides of the fence understand what education can do for everybody, for every citizen in this country. You know sometimes we think about education and we think that education is just for young people, but education is for all people, and even when we come here, Madam Speaker, we are educated. And I want to urge all Members, when we come to this august Chamber, let us maintain the high standard and the honour that is befitting of the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards: You see, we spoke today a lot about fussing, and fighting, and children fighting in school, but we fight here and they see that on TV, and then if we as leaders in this country do not set an example for the children of this country then we are in trouble in this country, Madam Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Richards:—and we must do better, Madam Speaker. And, Madam Speaker, I want to take this opportunity to thank the hon. Prime Minister of this country for placing the hands of education behind two mothers.

I too am a father and I understood and I still understand the challenge that is there for learning now especially as things have changed because of COVID, and I understand how difficult it could be to adjust, but as a people we must put our

hands, our hearts, and our heads together to ensure that the young people in this country are successful because the future of Trinidad and Tobago is still in the book bag of the children, but in that book bag you may not have books, it may have a laptop, but that is still relevant today. And to the Minister of Education and the Minister in the Ministry of Education, the teachers, the parents, the people who are providing the lunches, when we do this we are doing this for Trinidad and Tobago because our children need us.

Education is important and this is indeed a good Motion. It may be about 12 months of it too late, Madam Speaker, but this is a good Motion. And I want to encourage the Minister of Education in closing to continue because they have always been to Point Fortin. Continue to come to Point Fortin. You know they are doing special things in this country, both Ministers of Education. And with that I will take my seat, Madam Speaker, and once again thank you very much for allowing me the opportunity to speak today.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Leader of the House.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, and thanks to all contributors today. Madam Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to next Friday, the 4th of March at 1.30 p.m. On that day we will do Bills Nos. 4, 8 and 9 under Government Business—Bills Nos. 4, 8 and 9. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Okay. So just before I put the question, I just want to ask both the Leader of the House and the Acting Whip, to remind them of the provisions of Standing Order 53(1)(m) and ask them to use their influence to ensure that Members when they come into the Chamber comply with that particular Standing

Adjournment

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Order. Thank you very much.

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 6.12 p.m.